



‘BEHOLD THE PILGRIMS TO THE SHRINE OF STOUSH’

Ian Warden time travels back to a Sydney enthralled and sometimes appalled by the ‘unparalleled Biff’ between Jack Johnson and Tommy Burns at the 1908 World Heavyweight Championship

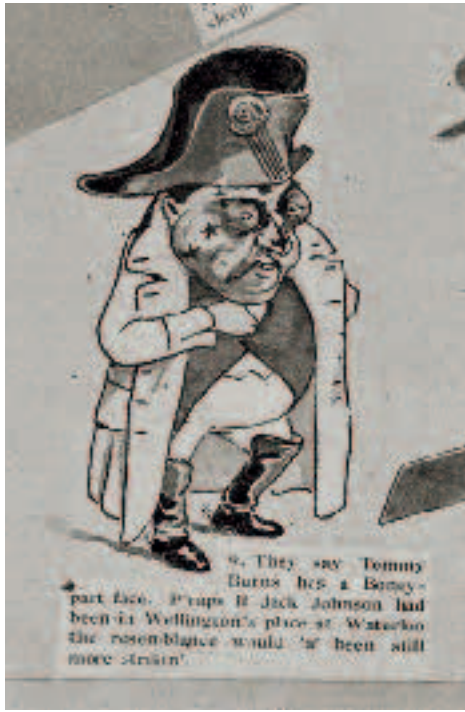
In his wild poem, *A Song of Stoush*, published in *The Bulletin* just five days after the Johnson–Burns fight of Boxing Day, 1908, O.C. Cabot wallowed in poetic licence. He gushed that it had been an occasion watched by a crowd of 25 000 men and two women who had paid a record 26 000 pounds to get in, been supervised by 260 policemen, consumed 26 million peanuts and seen USA’s Jack Johnson triumph over Canada’s Tommy Burns for 260 000 good reasons.

Cabot was carried away by the occasion (for example, the true crowd seems to have been about 20 000 and they would have had to munch 1300 peanuts each to consume 26 million of them) but, in his defence, he was describing in his poem the excitement of a *whole city* carried away.

Promoter Hugh D. ‘Huge Deal’ McIntosh’s huge deal had created, in his own words, ‘Fistanic History’. On fight day outside the Stadium in Rushcutters Bay, a crowd estimated to be twice the size of the crowd inside congregated to share the thrill of just being in the neighbourhood. It seemed the whole world was watching to see fistanic history made. Cabot called the occasion ‘unparalleled Biff’ and called those drawn to the Stadium and its bailiwick ‘the pilgrims to the shrine of Stoush’.

The Stadium could not hold everyone who wanted to see the fight and, with

Unknown artist
*Fight for the World's
 Championship: Tommy Burns and
 Jack Johnson, in the Ring at the
 Stadium, Rushcutters Bay, NSW,
 Saturday, December 26, 1908*
 b&w poster; 26.2 x 37.0 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn3638997



above:
Unknown artist
Cartoon showing Burns as a defeated Napoleon Bonaparte reproduced from *The Bulletin*, 31 December 1908 (Sydney: John Haynes and J.F. Archibald, 1908)

below:
Charles H. Kerry (1858–1928)
Burns–Johnson Boxing Contest, Sydney, 26 December 1908
gelatin silver and gouache photograph; 42.2 x 101.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3060336

seats costing between a breathtaking ten pounds and a challenging ten shillings, lots could not afford to go in. Those inside saw what one writer called Johnson's 'monotonous slaughter' of Burns. In the fourteenth round (by which time, it was reported, one battered side of Burns' face 'looked as if it didn't belong to the other'), the appointed police officer stepped in to prevent any more of this unparalleled biffing of poor Burns.

Sydney's connoisseurs of stoush were especially thrilled by this occasion because it was the 'First Time in the World's Fistic

History', as McIntosh's fight publicity spruiked in the McIntosh-published official souvenir program (the National Library has a copy of it), that 'the Champion Representatives of the White and Black Races have met for Racial and Individual Supremacy'.

To give the fight an extra freakish allure, McIntosh promoted it as the 'World's Heavyweight Championship between Tommy Burns the World Champion and Jack Johnson the Coloured Champion', staged in what McIntosh, making shameless claims for the

primitive, roofless venue he owned, called the 'Largest Open-air Hippodrome in the World'.

One of the Library's pictorial treasures is a huge panoramic photograph taken by one of the event's official photographers from a high vantage point of this 'Hippodrome' only moments before the fight began. The clarity is remarkable and the features of the faces in the rows of the entranced thousands can all be made out. The photograph tells us so much about the sportsgoing Sydney citizens of 1908. For example, almost everyone has dressed up for the occasion (with a suit, a waistcoat, a tie and a hat) in ways unimaginable today. The very few chaps in shirtsleeves stand out in their eccentric informality.

And it was an utterly male jamboree. Women were not allowed to attend boxing matches and there were, by reliable reports, only two women there (although by one unreliable report there were six, including one woman disguised as a man). One of the two, with a special exception made in her case, was the wife of Jack London, the great American writer who was in town to cover this globe-engrossing occasion for his countrymen.

An understanding of the racially electrified atmosphere surrounding the occasion is complicated by the fact that, however disposed the crowd might have felt to barrack for a white man against a black one, Burns got some of his support for reasons



other than his whiteness. They included the fact that he was only five foot seven while Johnson the 'Galveston Giant' was relatively enormous at just over six feet. Burns was the crowd's righteous little David and Johnson was its alarming Goliath.

Then, for many who might have come to the Stadium with pure sporting bipartisanship in their hearts, Johnson's 'flash' behaviour during the fight alienated them and those who reported it. '[Johnson's] victory, fairly won as it was, was wholly unpopular,' the *Sporting Notions* columnist of *The Bulletin* reported, noting how the fight finished with the very few cheers for Johnson only 'mere flecks of sound in an ocean of silence'.

That crowd was white to the core. It had given the brown man a fair deal and didn't feel called upon to do more. It put its hat on and streamed out.

Johnson's obnoxious 'flashness' had taken several forms. Always grinning, he radiated arrogance and talked incessantly to Burns while fighting him, mocking him, and even answering back to his detractors in the crowd. The ringside press heard and reported every snarled and chortled word. Then, too, his treatment of Burns had elements of wilful toying and torture about it: having knocked Burns down in the first round, Johnson could have finished the fight at any time but instead

chose to prolong Burns' humiliation. The crowd hated all this. 'The Amateur' reported for the sporting weekly *The Referee* that "'The cur! The brute!'" were the mildest expressions' of the crowd's anger at all this 'flashness'.

Why did Johnson behave like this? Biographer Denzil Batchelor thought that this was one of four fights in his career in which Johnson 'brought a murderous hatred into the ring'. Johnson, already embittered by terrible racial prejudice against him and his race in the USA, had deserved this tilt at the title but had had to chase and chase Burns for that chance with all the time Burns allegedly taunting him for having a 'yellow streak'. That accusation was the first thing the revenge-seeking Johnson talked about, seething, upon arrival in Sydney. He talked about it during the fight too.

'Who told you I was yellow?' Batchelor says Johnson scoffed at Burns as they



above:
Cover of the souvenir program for the Burns-Johnson championship fight (Sydney: 1908)

below left:
Unknown photographer
Portrait of Tommy Burns c.1908
b&w photograph; 17.8 x 12.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3770919

below right:
Barroni & Co.
Portrait of Jack Johnson c.1908
b&w photograph; 19.5 x 13.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3060857



fought. 'You're white. Dead scared white. White as the flag of surrender.' A *Daily Telegraph* man at the ringside reported:

They would shape up, then Johnson would make a few speeches—there would be thud after thud and the clicking sound of a man's teeth being rattled. The victim was Burns.

Lots of the journalism inspired by the fight (and Sydney was blessed with a rich range of dailies and weeklies) was professionally splendid, descriptive stuff like the passage just quoted. In these days before television, good sports writing made considerable use of word pictures to put their readers at ringside. The voluminous writing is full of sights and sounds. To read the fight's coverage in the National Library of Australia's newspaper collections is to *be there* (perhaps eating one's quota of 1300 peanuts), a pilgrim at the shrine of Stoush, simultaneously enthralled and appalled, hearing the sickening punches biff into Burns and perhaps being one of those disgustingly but somehow thrillingly splattered when, between rounds, Johnson the exotic monster gargled and then spat.

Every writer mentioned Johnson's gold teeth and, when Johnson bled a little at the mouth, 'The Amateur' from *Sporting Notions* saw and reported that:

ruby was soon added to the yellow [gold], white and pink of Johnson's facial jewel-case.

The columnist reported how at the end of the decisive first round:

Johnson sat cool and unruffled, laughing and talking. 'Water' he roared with a grin, and taking a mouthful that would have been a decent drink for an elephant, he gargled his throat, ejected the fluid where a fair quantity splashed over the furious pressmen, and sat up to have a look at the crowd.

'Arawa', at ringside for the *Daily Telegraph*, reported how Johnson,

'this ice-cool, blaring, dark-skinned gladiator', thudded punch after punch into Burns' stomach and that they 'sounded like a well-kicked football banging against a wall—whoomph!'

Does boxing brutalise those who watch it or perhaps even those who read such vivid descriptions of it with all that awful thudding, clicking, whoomping and bleeding? Sydney, a young city in a very young nation, showed considerable image-conscious interest in what the fight might encourage the watching world to think of the city that staged it. The entrepreneurially nimble McIntosh made for local consumption and for worldwide sale a documentary film of the men in training and then of the great occasion itself 'making in all', he promised, 'two hours of unsurpassed realism'. Two days after the fight, 8000 (presumably folk who had not been able to afford to see the real thing) paid to see the film shown at the Stadium.

'Arawa' wrote that Australia would 'get a great advertisement out of this grim business [the fight itself]' because 'pictures of the huddled crowd inside and throng outside were taken by the cinematograph'. The resulting film, he thought, 'will reveal to the four corners of the earth the fact that there are people and money in this land'.

Others, though, thought the fight was the worst possible advertisement for the city and the nation. After the fight and as part of the chorus of what *The Bulletin* sniggered was 'pious, post-pugilistic piffle' from clergy and newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised against this particular 'nakedly brutal scuffle' and against boxing contests per se because they 'stimulate the brute' in 'that unfortunately all too numerous class at the bottom of society, to whom the "bruiser" is ever the supreme type of hero'.

To claim that they [boxing matches] have a tonic effect upon the manly qualities of the race is the sheerest hypocrisy. They give no more stimulus to 'manly' qualities than do the sanguinary bull-fights of Madrid to the effeminates who watch them.

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Kerry and Company
*Burns and Johnson in
Characteristic Attitudes*
reproduced from *Town and
Country Journal*, 30 December
1908
(Sydney: Frank and Christopher
Bennett, 1908)

