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### **Paper:**

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# **Boxing, Race, and British Identity, 1945-1962**

**Martin Johnes and Matthew Taylor**

In 1947, the British Board of Boxing Control abolished its rule that British champions must have two white parents thus ending one of the few formal mechanisms of racial discrimination in British society. The Board had come under pressure from the press and government to make the change. This was an era where explicit discrimination seemed dangerous amidst fears for the future integrity of the British Empire and wrong after a war against racist nationalism. Four years later, Randolph Turpin, a mixed-race man from Leamington Spa, became middleweight champion of the world, earning a purse of \$25,000 and the accolade of the British press and public. For a moment, he was a national hero and one of the most famous people in the country. Turpin was specifically celebrated as a Briton rather than a black man; boxing was a rare space where people of colour were discussed in public without primary reference to their race. The sport thus gave some black men a high-profile role in public culture, enabling them to demonstrate their prowess. This helped normalize and celebrate black achievements and talents. It was somewhere they could find some respect in a society often full of racism.

The accolades offered to Turpin were rooted in the cultural importance of boxing in British society: he succeeded in an arena that mattered to white audiences. In spectator terms, the sport was one of the most popular. In the face of rival pastimes such as television, it did lose some support in the 1950s, but it remained an accepted form of entertainment for the working class and of character building and physical training for British society more broadly.<sup>1</sup> Boxing was also a deeply masculine territory. Its popularity was rooted in the importance of physicality and performance to conceptions of masculinity. The sport was a way for men to prove themselves and it put both bodies and how bodies could be used on display. Thus, cases like Randolph Turpin show that people of colour were not just victims of white racism and that race was rarely the only concept which structured black lives.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the historiography of British boxing see Martin Johnes and Matthew Taylor, 'Boxing in History', *Sport in History*, 31, no. 4 (2011), 357-62.

Acknowledging the successes of Turpin and other black boxers can help move the historiography of post-war race away from its tendency to concentrate on white attitudes to foreground the agency and achievements of black individuals. As Perry has argued, 'Black Britons were active and engaged participants and not merely objects of concern or subjects of curiosity, anxiety, scrutiny, or surveillance'.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, in boxing and beyond, race was never irrelevant. Like other sports in later periods, boxing in the middle of the twentieth century was a 'contested racial terrain' that gave its participants agency and status but which simultaneously operated within powerful systems of 'domination and constraint'.<sup>3</sup> No matter how much agency individuals had, race was a widespread matter of deep concern in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 60s. This was rooted in white anxieties about the impact of the half a million people who moved from the Commonwealth to the United Kingdom in the period between the end of the Second World War and the introduction of immigration controls in 1962. Despite being British subjects with the right to settle in the UK, black migrants from the Commonwealth were widely regarded as alien, lazy, immoral, irresponsible in their dealings with women, and a threat to a British way of life. Racial discrimination was legal and endemic. People of colour could struggle to secure quality housing and well-paid work. They might be stared at, told to go back to the jungle, or worse.<sup>4</sup> In 1948 and 1958, Britain experienced its first serious racial rioting since 1919.

Despite pioneering work from Perry and others, the impact of these dynamics on both migrants and British-born people of colour remains underdeveloped. The nature of the archival record means that there has been an emphasis on intellectuals, artists and activists rather than on working-class experiences and those who were not politically active.<sup>5</sup> Boxing

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<sup>2</sup> Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2016), 5.

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to these ideas see Douglas Hartmann, "Sport as contested terrain," in *A Companion to Racial and Ethnic Studies*, ed. David Theor Goldberg and John Solomos (Oxford, 2002), 40-15.

<sup>4</sup> For accounts of this racism see: Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, ch. 3. Marcus Collins, 'Pride and prejudice: West Indian men in mid-twentieth century Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 40, no. 3 (2001), 391-418. Chris Waters, "'Dark strangers' in our midst: discourse on race and nation in Britain, 1947-63," *Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 1997): 207-38. Elizabeth Buettner, "'This is Staffordshire not Alabama': racial geographies of Commonwealth immigration in early 1960s Britain", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 42, 4 (2014), 710-40. Lorna Chessum, *From Immigrants to Ethnic Minority: Making Black Community in Britain* (Aldershot, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Bill Schwarz (ed), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester, 2003); Amanda Bidnall, *The West Indian Generation: Remaking British Culture in London, 1945-1965* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017); Leslie James, *George Padmore and Decolonization from Below:*

offers an opportunity to broaden the focus of the historiography. It allows a study of the interaction of structural and individual racisms, and of how people of colour who were not politically active experienced and negotiated this context. The number of black boxers in the UK rose through the 1950s, as some migrants took up the sport to supplement their incomes and others moved to Britain because of the opportunities that existed there to fight professionally. By the early 1960s, a quarter of professional boxers registered in the UK were black, whereas maybe one percent of the wider population was. That so many black men turned to the brutal sport of boxing was a product of how it might afford them the dignity and financial rewards they were so often denied in other spheres. Nonetheless, they still faced significant occupational and casual prejudices. Only those born in Britain could qualify for British titles thus formalising migrants' status as outsiders. In the street and the ring, black fighters faced offensive racial language. Both the sport's stars and its journeymen were beholden to its powerbrokers. The sport's managers, trainers, and promoters remained exclusively white and its fans predominantly so. While many claimed to be colour blind, they did not treat or regard black and white boxers as equal in ability or character. In a sport that was falling into decline, many black fighters thus struggled to find work and the support required to build a career. Fearing, perhaps, losing further opportunities, they rarely spoke out publicly against the prejudices and tried to demonstrate their assimilation through dropping their African names, willingly adopting racially-derogatory monikers and stressing their local popularity in interviews and the like.

Underpinning and structuring these dynamics was the belief, even amongst those who thought that prejudice was wrong, that racial difference was not cultural but biological. Boxing could intensify such beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Black boxers were discussed and thought of as having both physical advantages (such as innate strength) over white fighters but also physical flaws (such as an inability to take punches). Boxing may even have gone as far as adding to wider perceptions of black men as naturally violent and savage. It was such feelings that ensured that race relations were so fraught since for some white Britons integration was a biological impossibility.

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*Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015). For other examples of works concentrating on migrant voices see Clair Wills, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-War Britain* (London: Penguin, 2017) and Jon Bloomfield, *Our City: Migrants and the Making of Modern Birmingham* (Birmingham: Unbound, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> For the impact of black sporting successes on racial ideas see Ben Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics: The Sporting Black Diaspora* (London: Sage, 2010).

However, regular contact with anyone not white was so new for most Britons that race relations were fluid and confused. Contemporary studies into the topic, which themselves were products of the concerns around immigration, portrayed complex and contradictory pictures of British racism. The orthodoxy of ideas of racial difference and of migrants as outsiders was clear in the framing of the research and even the titles of such studies.<sup>7</sup> But they also produced evidence of how immigration was accepted by many in principle and of how overt racism was often disapproved of. There was not, however, a consensus about the actual dynamics of what was happening. Banton's 1959 study, for example, argued that while prejudice was not widespread, there was still considerable discrimination.<sup>8</sup> Glass' 1960 study, in contrast, suggested there was more verbal and casual prejudice than actual formal discrimination. This led her to write of the existence of 'benevolent prejudice.'<sup>9</sup> Nava has used the contemporary investigations to argue that hostility and overt racism co-existed with hospitality, solidarity and acceptance, 'elements which sometimes coexisted in contradictory and unconscious ways.'<sup>10</sup> Panayi, meanwhile, has summed up the contradictory long-term British responses to immigration as 'multicultural racism'.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary black intellectuals understood only too well the effects of this contradiction. George Lamming, for example, wrote of how white Britons had a 'way of seeing,' where they could simultaneously articulate a commitment to racial equality whilst demonstrating deep-seated but unspoken assumptions of racial difference.<sup>12</sup> It was this that made racism so insidious because it underpinned and enabled discrimination whilst at the same time allowing it to be denied. Boxing's celebrations of black fighters, and its claims of colour blindness when it was riven by racial assumptions that created discrimination, is a vivid illustration of how racism operated in practice. It was casual and widespread but not always visible or consistent. It did not prevent all individuals from succeeding. But it also existed at a structural level that was never irrelevant and harmed a great many lives. And it intersected with other factors that might blunt or exacerbate its effects.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Sheila Patterson, *Dark Strangers: A Sociological Study in the Absorption of a Recent West Indian Migrant Group in Brixton, South London* (London, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Banton, *White and Coloured: The Behaviour of British People Towards Colonial Immigrants* (London, 1959), 210.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Glass, *Newcomers: The West Indians in London* (London: 1960), 216-8

<sup>10</sup> Mica Nava, 'Sometimes antagonistic, sometimes ardently sympathetic: contradictory responses to migrants in postwar Britain,' *Ethnicities* 14, no. 3 (June 2014): 458-80.

<sup>11</sup> Panikos Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism since 1800* (Harlow: Pearson, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London, 1960), ch. 4. Indeed, for Lamming, being turned into an object for toleration was an act of colonisation in itself.

It was not just post-war migrants that this situation affected. Even in 1945, there were maybe between 10,000 and 30,000 people of colour in the UK.<sup>13</sup> Immigration complicated the position of longer-term migrants and their British-born children because it brought the question of racial difference to the fore of public consciousness. Schwarz has argued that immigration even meant Englishness became re-racialized as a white rather than imperial identity.<sup>14</sup> Boxing provides an opportunity to explore the neglected question of how this impacted upon British-born people of colour. The existence until 1947 of a colour bar on British championships shows that there had always been conceptions of national identity based on whiteness. The abolition of that bar and the celebrations of Turpin suggest there may have been a brief moment where a more open conception of Britishness existed. As immigration grew, British-born black boxers did qualify for British championships whereas Commonwealth migrants did not, but that was the only practical difference in how the two were treated. Ideas of racial difference remained far more powerful than any conception of national identity as cultural or based on place of birth.

Thus, as this article demonstrates, boxing offers an insight into the dynamics of race in the years between the end of the war and the first immigration act. The article employs newspapers, the boxing press, government archives and autobiographies to demonstrate how responses to immigration in 1950s and 1960s Britain were complex and contradictory.<sup>15</sup> Black voices are present in these sources but they are always moderated by white editors and, seemingly, boxers' own desire not to alienate the white powerbrokers and customers of their industry. While race was widely discussed, both directly and indirectly, there was rarely open discussion of racism. Nonetheless, through reading between the lines and the triangulation of sources, a picture of the significance of race in one important part of British popular culture does emerge. People of colour became more visible, some of the formal few mechanisms of racial exclusion fell away and black individuals could both forge successful careers and win the respect and even adulation of white Britons. But the absence of overt public racism

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<sup>13</sup> Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, p. 7. The war had led to a significant rise in the number of people of colour in the UK. Ian Spencer estimates that the black and Asian population of Britain was 7,000 in 1939. He puts the number of military recruits from the Caribbean at around 12,500, alongside 1000 civilian recruits and the 1,200 British Hondurans who worked as foresters in Scotland. Ian Spencer, 'World War Two and the Making of Multiracial Britain', in Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (eds), *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 209-18; 209, 212.

<sup>14</sup> Bill Schwarz, 'The only white man in there': the re-racialisation of England 1956-1968,' *Race and Class* 38, no. 1 (July 1996): 65-78.

<sup>15</sup> The records of the British Boxing Board of Control are not currently open to historians.

masked much deeper levels of both structural and interpersonal prejudice. Racial differences remained accepted as common sense by white Britons. Indeed, immigration intensified racism in Britain, changing the perceived position of people of colour from exotic novelties to threats to society. Boxing is thus a reminder of the contradictory dynamics of race. Formal mechanisms of exclusion could be removed, while informal mechanisms intensified. Individuals could be celebrated, while people of colour as a group were looked down upon. Black achievements could simultaneously reinforce ideas of black inferiority. It was this context that made successes like that of Turpin more significant, but it is also why they were not more common. As Gilroy has argued, multiculturalism was a façade for a deeply racialized society.<sup>16</sup>

### **British Boxing's colour bar**

Boxing had always been realm where migrants and their descendants made an impact. For people on the economic margins of society, the sport offered an opportunity to make a good living and find some agency in a society that often looked down upon them. For Jews in particular the sport was important in challenging ideas of them as weak or cowardly. However, the sport could also have negative impacts on perceptions of migrants.<sup>17</sup> Black boxers also have a long history in Britain. Bill Richmond, for example, was a former slave who settled in Yorkshire in the late eighteenth century and used the sport to move up the social ladder, even becoming an usher at the coronation of George VI.<sup>18</sup> He was followed by other black boxers, some of whom were born in Britain and others who went there to fight. Moore has argued that African-American boxers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century used the sport to 'assert their manhood' in a 'country that denied their equality'. It gave them a 'release from the daily indignities' endured in a racist society. Nonetheless, this was not straightforward. Black successes in the ring threatened ideas of white superiority and thus black fighters were depicted 'as Sambos or savages' and authorities restricted their opportunities to take on white boxers.<sup>19</sup> Such concerns could be found in Britain too, where

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Belnapp Press, 2000), 256.

<sup>17</sup> David Dee, 'The hefty Hebrew': Boxing and British-Jewish identity, 1890-1960,' *Sport in History* 32, no. 3 (September 2012): 361-81. Michael Berkowitz, 'Jewish Fighters in Britain in Historical Context: Repugnance, Requiem, Reconsideration', *Sport in History*, 31, no. 4 (2011): 423-44. Ruti Unger and Michael Berkowitz, 'From Daniel Mendoza to Amir Khan,' in *Fighting Back? Jewish and Black Boxers in Britain*, ed. Michael Berkowitz and Ruti Unger (London, 2007), 3-16.

<sup>18</sup> Luke G. Williams, *Richmond Unchained* (Amberley, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Louis Moore, *I Fight for a Living: Boxing and the Battle for Black Manhood, 1880-1915* (Urbana:

the Empire gave the authorities a vested interest in maintaining the illusion of white superiority. In the Edwardian period the British government intervened to stop the controversial African-American boxer Jack Johnson fighting Billy Wells. Johnson visited the UK anyway and his public appearances were greeted with a mixture of adulation and outright hostility.<sup>20</sup> It was out of that controversy that a formal colour bar emerged in British boxing which prevented fighters of colour holding a British title.

British boxing's colour bar operated first through de facto governing body the National Sporting Club, and then, from 1929, via the regulations of its successor, the British Board of Boxing Control (BBBC). Regulation 31 paragraph 4 of the BBBC's rules stated that contestants for British championships 'must be legally British subjects and born of white parents, must be resident not less than two years in the British Isles, of which the first 12 months must be continuous and the aggregate of two years must be completed in three years.'<sup>21</sup> Non-white fighters were permitted to compete for British Empire Championships, although initially bouts had to take place outside the UK. The regulation received implicit backing from the Home Office, which intervened to ban prominent black versus white fights in 1911 and 1923 and frequently advised promoters not to stage such contests during the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>22</sup> The Home Office stance was based on precedent and Colonial Office claims that interracial fights might lead to trouble and unrest among the racially-mixed populations of the Dominions.

The government's position was an important justification for the colour bar but the BBBC also claimed that the rule kept British titles in British rather than Empire hands. Yet the bar was also applied to black British-born boxers. They were not many in number but, like other people of colour, they were part of communities where they lived, worked and formed relationships with white neighbours.<sup>23</sup> Yet no matter how much integration there was at a local or personal level, the colour bar is a reminder that Britishness was widely regarded

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University of Illinois Press, 2017), 10, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Theresa Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), ch. 3.

<sup>21</sup> As reported in *Gloucestershire Echo*, 27 June 1947.

<sup>22</sup> See 'Boxing contests between black men and white', Handwritten memorandum, 17 January 1931, The National Archives (hereafter TNA): HO 45/18745.

<sup>23</sup> For evidence of racial integration before 1939 see Laura Tabili, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841-1939* (Basingstoke, 2011) and David Holland, 'The social networks of South Asian migrants in the Sheffield area during the early twentieth century', *Past and Present*, 236 (2017), 243-79. On black experiences in interwar Britain see Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, 2015).



as a white identity. This was certainly not a legal position however, and like other racial injustices and insults, boxing's colour bar created significant resentment amongst the black Britons it applied to. One such example was Len Johnson, a mixed-race welterweight from Manchester who was acknowledged as one of the most able fighters in Europe. He even threatened to retire prematurely, claiming that boxing's endemic prejudice had stifled his career.<sup>24</sup>

Criticism of the bar grew during the Second World War. During a war for freedom, formalized racial discrimination seemed morally wrong to many and exactly the kind of thing Britain was fighting against. There was thus much public criticism of the racial policies of US military units stationed in the UK (although this also owed something to anti-Americanism).<sup>25</sup> Discomfort around boxing's colour was focused around Tommy Martin, the British-born son of a Jamaican father serving in the RAF. His case was taken up by Walter Green MP who urged the Home Secretary to 'take steps to discourage such discrimination against British-born subjects solely on colour grounds.'<sup>26</sup> Martin also received support from the League of Coloured Peoples, with its leader Dr Harold Moody calling on the BBBC to reconsider its ban 'in the light of recent happenings such as the effect of Nazi racial theory and also the rallying of the Colonial members of the Empire' in support of the war.<sup>27</sup> He also received considerable backing from the press; the *Daily Herald*, for example, suggested that boxing's colour bar 'should have been scrapped years ago.'<sup>28</sup> The position of the government was also changing. Fearful of damaging relations with colonial governments, it was reluctant to endorse any openly discriminatory racial policy. The Colonial Office grew worried about the impact of boxing's colour on the 'coloured community in this country,' which reportedly felt 'very strongly about [Martin's] exclusion from the British Championship.'<sup>29</sup> Home Office officials considered the BBBC's rationale 'somewhat unconvincing' and the rule discriminatory and outdated. But anxious not to

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<sup>24</sup> *Northern Whig and Belfast Post*, 26 August 1930.

<sup>25</sup> Gavin Schaffer, 'Fighting Racism: Black Soldiers and Workers in Britain during the Second World War', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 28, no.2-3 (2010), 246-265

<sup>26</sup> Home Office to British Boxing Board of Control, 16 July 1941, TNA: HO 45/18745.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2003), 264.

<sup>28</sup> *Daily Herald*, 1 August 1941.

<sup>29</sup> J. L. Keith to K. L. Macassey, 26 July 1941, TNA: HO 45/18745. On the British government's relations with its Colonial counterparts during the war, see Ashley Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006); Ashley Jackson, Yasmin Khan and Gajendra Singh (eds), *An Imperial World at War: The British Empire, 1939-45* (Abingdon, 2017).

embarrass the BBBC, Home Secretary Herbert Morrison stopped short of accusing it publicly of racial prejudice.<sup>30</sup> This was perhaps not surprising since British government, like wider British society, remained shot through with racial assumptions and prejudices and its public bashfulness around colour bars disguised its private attempts to minimise the number of people of colour in the UK and their role in the war effort.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, led by its autocratic secretary Charles Donmall, the BBBC refused even to debate the colour bar.

The historiography of the post-war Labour government tends to portray the administration's racial attitudes in negative terms, stressing its opposition to both the realities and perceived threat of Commonwealth immigration.<sup>32</sup> However, boxing shows the government was actually interventionist on at least this question of racial equality. The Colonial Office took up the case again in 1946, although it found little change in the position of the BBBC. In a meeting with Colonial Office officials, Donmall defended the colour bar on the grounds that South Africa and other Dominions opposed non-white fighters competing for British titles and that considerable unrest had allegedly been caused by mixed race championship fights in the USA.<sup>33</sup> In an interview in early 1947, he expressed other considerations:

It is only right that a small country such as ours should have championships restricted to boxers of white parents. Otherwise we might be faced with a situation where all our British titles are held by Coloured Empire champions. The board has done much for the Empire boxers of colour. We have a very high regard for them as men and as boxers. They are not penalised by this rule. They have the British Empire championship open to them and the Empire titles have always been regarded by the Board as infinitely more important than the purely domestic British championship.<sup>34</sup>

The BBBC's vice-president was less careful to avoid crude racial stereotyping, arguing that black-white contests were unfair because 'people of Negro race have bigger and harder

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<sup>30</sup> Minute, KM, 30 July 1941, TNA: HO 45/18745.

<sup>31</sup> Gavin Schaffer, 'Re-thinking the history of blame: Britain and minorities during the Second World War', *National Identities*, 8, no. 4 (2006), 401-19, 409.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Kathleen Paul, 'The politics of citizenship in post-war Britain,' *Contemporary Record* 6, no. 3 (1992): 452-73.

<sup>33</sup> Minute, 26 June 1946, TNA: CO 876/89.

<sup>34</sup> *News Chronicle*, 23 January 1947, quoted in James Morton, *Fighters: The Lives and Sad Deaths of Freddie Mills and Randolph Turpin* (London, 2004), 105.

skulls.’<sup>35</sup>

In March 1947, Cliff Anderson from Guyana lost to Al Phillips in a British Empire featherweight title bout. Anderson had knocked his opponent down three times and the referee’s points decision was met with uproar by the crowd. The incident was linked by many observers to the discrimination of the colour bar. In the *Daily Express*, John MacAdam thought that the fight ‘brought to a head all the things we have always felt about the colour bar.’ He considered that its abolition was now vital to avoid the insinuation of discrimination ‘against coloured cousins from any part of the Empire.’<sup>36</sup> Peter Wilson of the *Sunday Pictorial* noted receiving letters and calls from fans all over the country protesting the decision against Anderson: ‘there is a strong feeling that a coloured man does not get a fair break in professional British boxing.’<sup>37</sup>

According to John Lewis, Labour MP for Bolton, who had begun a new drive against the colour bar weeks before the Anderson verdict, most sports journalists were in favour of its revision.<sup>38</sup> *Reynold’s News*, the *Sunday Pictorial* and the boxing weekly *Ringsider* all mounted campaigns against the colour bar and most observers believed that public opinion firmly supported its removal.<sup>39</sup> The *Sunday Pictorial* tested this by conducting a ‘Public House’ poll on the question. It reported that 19,617 voted in favour of abolition and just 247 wanted to keep it.<sup>40</sup> By this point, the Colonial Secretary Arthur Creech Jones had publicly declared his view that the colour bar was ‘unjustified’ and ‘strongly resented by a large public in this country who are interested in boxing.’ In a letter to the BBBC, he reiterated that the continuation of the rule would be ‘prejudicial to good relations between Great Britain and British colonies.’<sup>41</sup> In the context of changing post-war imperial priorities, and the imminent transfer of power in India, Burma and Ceylon, anything which hinted at older colonial attitudes of white racial superiority and which could be appear out of step with the beginnings of a multi-racial Commonwealth, was now actively discouraged by ministers and officials.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Minute, 27 June 1946, TNA: CO 876/89.

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Express*, 20 March 1947.

<sup>37</sup> *Sunday Pictorial*, 23 March 1947.

<sup>38</sup> John Lewis to George Isaacs, 26 February 1947, CO 876/89.

<sup>39</sup> Dennis Lyons to Arthur Creech Jones, 3 May 1947; Editorial in *Ringsider*, undated [1947] (clipping in TNA: CO 876/89); *Reynold’s News*, 7 September 1947. On public support for revision of the rule, see *The Star*, 28 March 1947 and *Daily Mirror*, 28 March 1947.

<sup>40</sup> *Sunday Pictorial*, 18 May 1947.

<sup>41</sup> *The Guardian*, 23 March 1947; E. R. Edmonds to Charles Donmall, 5 June 1947, TNA: CO 876/89.

<sup>42</sup> See Ronald Hyam, *Britain’s Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation* (Cambridge, 2006), 166.

The argument for abolition was particularly powerful in the immediate post-war years because it tapped into a wider 'culture of tribute' which, as Webster has argued, 'promoted an image of British liberality and tolerance and associated Britishness with an expansive transnational community.'<sup>43</sup> Advocates stressed the war service of black boxers and their patriotism. According to *The People*, Lefty Flynn, a Jamaican welterweight who had lived in Britain since 1936, had 'served this country throughout the war,' first volunteering for rescue work during the London blitz and then as a stoker in the merchant navy. Elsewhere Flynn was proclaimed 'as proud and loyal a Briton as they make 'em.'<sup>44</sup> *Empire News* reminded its readers of 'the cheers these coloured boys who fought in the war received as they strode along in the victory march' and 'the dead they left behind,' concluding that the rule was not fair, logical or British.<sup>45</sup> For *The Star*, it was 'an insult to the coloured peoples of the Empire, and especially those who fought so gallantly during the war.'<sup>46</sup> Journalists thus increasingly saw the colour bar as anachronistic and a violation of British notions of 'fair play' and 'sportsmanship.'<sup>47</sup> The fact that in the case of boxing it was the British, and not the Americans, who appeared intolerant and illiberal on matters of race, was particularly embarrassing. A report, verified by a correspondent of the *Chicago Defender*, who wrote directly to the Colonial Secretary, that American world champions might boycott Britain and its champions if the colour bar remained, may well have played a part in official and public thinking.<sup>48</sup>

In July 1947 the BBBC finally agreed to remove the colour bar, an often overlooked milestone in the history of British multiculturalism. The Board put in its place a new regulation that required contestants for British championships be born and resident in Britain, with their fathers also British subjects and residents at the time of the boxer's birth. This was done to ensure that British championships remained domestic concerns, 'open only to those who by birth and residence have a stake in the country and look upon it as their home.'<sup>49</sup> The

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<sup>43</sup> Wendy Webster, 'Transnational Communities of Allies,' in *Fighting for Britain? Negotiating Identities in Britain during the Second World War*, ed. Wendy Ugolini and Juliette Pattinson (Oxford, 2015), 209-33, at 218.

<sup>44</sup> *The People*, 18 March 1945; *Daily Mirror*, 30 October 1943.

<sup>45</sup> *Empire News*, 28 July 1946.

<sup>46</sup> *The Star*, 23 March 1947.

<sup>47</sup> See *Empire News*, 28 July 1946; *Sunday Pictorial*, 27 March 1947; *The Star*, 28 March 1947; *Daily Express*, 27 March 1947.

<sup>48</sup> Major Robinson, *Chicago Defender*, New York Bureau to Creech Jones, 19 May 1947, TNA: CO 876/89.

<sup>49</sup> Field Roscoe & Co. Solicitors to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 28 July 1947, TNA: CO 876/89.

colour element of the rule may have been removed but a distinction was maintained between domestic and Colonial Britons, despite all technically being British subjects. The new rule came into operation in 1948, the same year as the British Nationality Act, which made some 800 million people citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies. The primary motivation of the Act was to establish a uniform legal status for all British subjects and in so doing to cement links with Britain's white dominions.<sup>50</sup> However, while never intended, it became the basis for the immigration of half a million non-white British subjects in the 1950s and early 1960s.

### **Boxing and racial inclusion in the wake of the war**

In the same year the colour bar was abolished, Dick Turpin became the first black man to win a British boxing title when he secured the middleweight championship in front of 40,000 people in Birmingham. The press made little of the milestone beyond noting it.<sup>51</sup> Turpin was born and raised in Leamington Spa to a white mother and a father who had moved to the UK from Guyana during the First World War. As youngsters, he and his brother Randolph had learnt to fight when faced with racial prejudice and both later became professional boxers. In 1951, Randolph went a step further than his brother when he took the world title by unexpectedly beating Sugar Ray Robinson.

He was the first Briton to hold the world middleweight title since 1893 and was adopted as a symbol of British greatness in a wider context of angst over perceived national decline. This same context would subsequently contribute to the negative ways immigrants were perceived and treated because they became seen as another sign of national decline.<sup>52</sup> But, at this moment, it became a reason to celebrate a British-born black man because he had shown that the nation could still hold its own.<sup>53</sup> 'It was a glorious victory,' crowed the *Daily Express*,

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<sup>50</sup> Randall Hansen, 'The politics of citizenship in 1940s Britain: The British Nationality Act' *Twentieth Century British History* 10, no. 1 (January 1999), 67-95

<sup>51</sup> For an example report see *Daily Mirror*, 29 June 1948, which called Turpin the son of a British Guinea Negro.

<sup>52</sup> Sonya O. Rose, 'Who are we now? Writing the post-war 'nation,' 1948-2001,' in *Race, Nation and Empire: Making Histories, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Catherine Hall and Keith McClelland (Manchester, 2010), 154-74, at 155.

<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the press welcomed the selection of Trinidad sprint champion McDonald Bailey for the British team at the 1948 Olympics in the hope he would arrest British sporting decline. Roy McCree, 'In the crucible of change: Bailey, Britain and the post-war Olympic Games,' *Sport in Society* 19, no. 10 (2016): 1385-1401.

Randolph Turpin, the underdog, the British boy whom few of us thought could survive more than quarter of an hour with Sugar Ray Robinson, not only survived but punched the coloured American from pillar to post, from post to ropes, from ropes to his corner, in 15 savage, bruising rounds of which he did not lose more than a couple.<sup>54</sup>

When race was mentioned in press coverage, it was in passing and descriptive terms. The *Daily Telegraph*, for example, called Robinson an ‘America negro’ but Turpin a ‘Midlands-born coloured man.’<sup>55</sup> Many previews and reports of the fight made no mention of colour at all but there was considerable effort to stress not just Turpin’s nationality but the manner of his victory too. The *Daily Mirror* called him the ‘hope of Britain’ and afterwards said he had won in ‘such a convincing manner in the grand old English style’ and ‘without any of the hokum that the Americans have used to bedazzle and bamboozle their opponents before the fight.’<sup>56</sup> An editorial in the *Daily Mail* noted how thousands of men and women not normally interested in boxing had felt ‘a lifting of the spirits’ because the fight had been won ‘in the British way, with no preliminary boosting or boasting.’ It hoped that ‘Turpinism’ could spread to the Suez Canal or Persian Gulf, satisfying the British psychological need for a boost.<sup>57</sup> This was all more than just journalist rhetoric. In Turpin’s hometown, he was given a civic reception attended by 10,000 people. A letter to the *Daily Mirror* thanked the paper for backing ‘OUR LADS’ and proclaimed ‘thanks to Randy, we can cheer in the mines, factory and field, cheer the good old country back into the eyes of the world.’<sup>58</sup>

Turpin remained a central figure in British boxing even after losing his world title to Robinson two months later. In February 1952, he was voted most popular British fighter by *Boxing News* readers for the second time (with 95% of the vote) and was widely acknowledged as the UK’s star performer and main box office draw.<sup>59</sup> This was not without significance. A survey of mid-1950s Brixton suggested that black sportsmen and entertainers

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<sup>54</sup> *Daily Express*, 11 July 1951.

<sup>55</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 11 July 1951.

<sup>56</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 10 July, 11, 2 July 1951.

<sup>57</sup> *Daily Mail*, 12 July 1951.

<sup>58</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 13 July 1951.

<sup>59</sup> *Boxing News*, 6 February 1952; Brief for Financial Secretary’s meeting with representatives of the British Boxing Board of Control, 4 February 1953, TNA: CUST 118/531.

had enlarged ‘the image of the coloured person in British eyes.’<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Kenneth Little’s 1940s study of race argued that contact with black people playing sport and participating successfully in other ‘English social customs’ created ‘a very favourable impression’ which could lead to positive views of the black population in general.<sup>61</sup> Sport was especially important here since it so central to working-class conceptions of masculinity and a space where men could prove their worth.<sup>62</sup> Although boxing was an individual sport, fighters were also associated with places. This meant that their successes became symbols of civic pride in much the same way as football clubs. Thus the celebrations of the Turpin brothers and others were not just celebrations of black individuals but of the towns or cities they lived in too. Crucially, for the two Turpin brothers, like popular interwar black boxers such as Len Johnson, their successes predated the significant growth of immigration. This meant they could be accepted and celebrated by the wider population without problem because they were not representative of any wider colour question. Nonetheless, Turpin is a powerful illustration that the symbolic idea of Britishness as white was not yet monolithic.

Turpin’s fame existed at a symbolically distant level that required no personal interaction between the white supporter and anyone of colour. While this made it easier for people to celebrate him without discomfort, sport also showed there was a degree of acceptance of people of colour when direct personal contact occurred in specific contexts. A study of Liverpool in the 1940s argued that West Indians were freely accepted in factory recreational facilities and were members of local darts, cricket and football teams, with sport representing one of the heights of integration.<sup>63</sup> Other studies, however, questioned this, with migrants often having their own teams rather than joining white institutions.<sup>64</sup> The captain of a 1950s Tyneside team for West African and West Indian seamen welcomed the opportunity playing football gave for interacting with white people and how it gave him and others something to talk about to whites at work. The club’s manager remarked that the team was very popular, greatly improving race relations where they played but again this seemed to be partly rooted in the team’s curiosity:

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<sup>60</sup> Patterson, *Dark Strangers*, 273, 233-4.

<sup>61</sup> K. L. Little, *Negroes in Britain: A Study of Racial Relations in English Society* (London, 1947), 243-6.

<sup>62</sup> See Martin Johnes, *Soccer and Society: South Wales, 1900-1939* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), ch. 5; Brad Beaven, *Leisure, Citizenship and Working-Class Men in Britain, 1850-1945* (Manchester University Press, 2005), 74-80.

<sup>63</sup> Anthony H. Richmond, *Colour Prejudice in Britain: A Study of West Indian Workers in Liverpool, 1941-1951* (London, 1954), 95, 113-4.

<sup>64</sup> Patterson, *Dark Strangers*, 273.

Quite a number of these places where we played are situated in areas where the coloured man is rarely seen, and you could imagine the surprise seeing a whole lot of them and, what is more, playing football with them; not to mention children gathering around for autographs. Colonial boys were thought of as good sports by almost all who saw them play.<sup>65</sup>

The ‘almost all’ surely hints at something more sinister in some reactions but what is most notable here is the idea that the black footballers were not only sharing the cultural space of football but also playing the game in the right way, with an adherence to ideas of fair play that were always important in the rhetoric if not always the reality of British sporting culture.

The same was true of black boxers. As in the USA, it was those who were polite, modest and unthreatening who were celebrated. Turpin was one such boxer whose diffidence and modesty was frequently remarked upon.<sup>66</sup> Another was Roy Ankarah, nicknamed the Black Flash, from Ghana, who arrived in the UK in 1950. *Boxing News* soon commented on the ‘great following’ that Ankarah had gathered round him; ‘outside the ring you won’t find a more likeable person’ it noted.<sup>67</sup> He became Empire featherweight champion in 1951 and fought a number of high-profile bouts in Nottingham. Press reports observed that his time training in the city had led local people to adopt him, hailing him for autographs wherever he went. ‘They like this quiet, smiling modest lad from the Gold Coast and his charming young wife’ proclaimed the *Daily Mirror*.<sup>68</sup>

Thus while black boxers may have been celebrated when they conformed to certain behavioural expectations and when they helped raise the morale of the nation, there were distinct limits to what this signified about the wider acceptance of people of colour in British society. Whether they were born in the UK or not, they were expected to keep to designated roles where they could be ‘tolerated’ as exotic novelties. Boxers themselves discovered this when they stepped outside sporting contexts. One promoter recorded how in 1946 it was difficult to find a London hotel willing to take an African-American boxer that he had

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<sup>65</sup> Sydney Collins, *Coloured Minorities in Britain* (London, 1957), 107.

<sup>66</sup> See *Empire News*, 8 July 1951; ‘World Champ Goes Home,’ British Pathe News, 1951, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/world-champ-goes-home/query/randolph+turpin> [accessed 10 September 2018].

<sup>67</sup> *Boxing News*, 20 December 1950; 8 November 1950.

<sup>68</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 6 June 1952.



brought over for a world championship bout.<sup>69</sup> In 1951, Dick Turpin had an application for membership of his local Conservative Club turned down, despite being a former British champion. No reason was given and his manager told the press ‘One can only assume that they object to Dick’s colour.’<sup>70</sup> Even in the ring, a space normally deemed acceptable for black men, the deeper prejudices of society could surface. At one of Nigerian Hogan Bassey’s first bouts in England in the early 1950s, his opponent called him a ‘nigger’ and was deeply unhappy at having to fight him.<sup>71</sup>

### **Black fighters and the boxing industry**

Bassey was one of a number of established boxers from the Caribbean and West Africa who, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, began to base themselves in the UK because of the opportunities the country’s professional boxing circuit offered. Introduced by the British, boxing was popular amongst the indigenous population of these colonies, for whom it was a route to social status and esteem, and it was also often promoted there by the press as part of a push for a modern urban culture.<sup>72</sup> But in colonial settings it was often curtailed by local racial and class hierarchies and removed from the management networks that supported athletes on the path towards world titles. Leaving was thus almost essential for any boxer who wanted to reach the sport’s heights and the impact of colonization on mindsets meant their destination was usually Britain rather than the USA.<sup>73</sup>

The shock of the climate, food and wider culture meant adapting to Britain was no easier for boxers than other migrants but some did forge successful careers and win local followings. Most notable were Dick Tiger, a Nigerian who moved to Liverpool in 1955 and became British middleweight champion in 1960, and Hogan Bassey who settled in the same

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<sup>69</sup> Jack Solomons, *Jack Solomons Tells All* (London, 1951), 120.

<sup>70</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 1 March 1951.

<sup>71</sup> Hogan Bassey, *Bassey on Boxing* (London, 1963) 23.

<sup>72</sup> Duzendorfer ‘Ethnicized boxing’, 1018. Michael Gennaro, ‘‘The Whole Place is in Pandemonium’’: Dick Tiger Versus Gene Fullmer III, and the Consumption of Boxing in Nigeria,’ *International Journal of the History of Sport* 30, no. 16 (2013): 1903-14. The classic work on the politics of sport in British colonies is C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (New York: Pantheon, [1963], 1994). For a broader view of imperial sporting culture see Patrick F. McDevitt, *‘May the Best Man Win’’: Sport, Masculinity and Nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880-1935* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004).

<sup>73</sup> Emmanuel Akyeampong, ‘Bukom and the Social History of Boxing in Accra: Warfare and Citizenship in Precolonial Ga Society’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 35, 1, (2002), 39-60, 47.

city in 1951, and became Empire featherweight champion in 1955. Their progress was followed by the media in their countries of origin and each success attracted to Britain other hopefuls from the same place. Gradually networks were established between boxing communities in Britain and West Africa in particular.<sup>74</sup> This movement, of course, reflected the wider growing levels of immigration which itself also boosted the number of black boxers in Britain. Some black migrants turned to boxing to substitute their earnings on discovering that Britain was a world of low wages and poor housing for people of colour. By 1963, it was estimated that a quarter of the 500 licensed professional boxers in Britain were black.<sup>75</sup>

This rise owed much to the active pursuit of new fighters from abroad, even if some in the industry did share wider fears around the character of those moving to Britain. One Liverpool manager, for example, wrote to a Nigerian promoter asking him to send ‘six good young, well behaved boxers.’ Another Liverpool manager who encouraged Nigerian boxers to move to the UK was Peter Banasko, the son of a Ghanaian father and a Liverpool mother; he sometimes paid the passage, lodgings and initial upkeep of immigrant boxers.<sup>76</sup> Without such external support, many would not have been able to make the move at all. Hogan Bassey was only able to afford the fare to Liverpool in 1951 because, as an already established boxer, he had friends at home who thought he could succeed and thus collected the money for him.<sup>77</sup>

Why a few British managers were looking for immigrant fighters is less clear. In the first few years after the war, there were some attempts to use inter-race bouts to attract audiences. This was a continuation of a much older tradition of seeing boxing as a test of the comparative strength and vitality of black and white.<sup>78</sup> By now, such ideas were not discussed in public but they still seemed to hold some appeal. One 1951 Norwich fight saw the whole undercard advertised as ‘white versus coloured boxers.’ The attendance was said to have been the best in the city for ‘a very long time.’<sup>79</sup> White-black programmes were similarly trialled in Bognor, Derby and West Hartlepool, with mixed results.<sup>80</sup> In 1950, even

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<sup>74</sup> On memories of the shock see Bassey, *Bassey on Boxing*, 18-19, 21. On the networks see Gennaro, ‘Empire boxers are the goods’.

<sup>75</sup> *Daily Mail*, 18 November 1964.

<sup>76</sup> Adeyinka Makinde, *Dick Tiger: The Life and Times of a Boxing Immortal* (Tarentum, 2004), 20-1, 23.

<sup>77</sup> Bassey, *Bassey on Boxing*.

<sup>78</sup> Moore, *I Fight for a Living*.

<sup>79</sup> *Diss Express*, 19 January 1951, 2 February 1951.

<sup>80</sup> *Bognor Observer*, 4 September 1948; *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 28 September 1948; *Northern Daily Mail*, 24 June 1950.

a boxing booth at a Lincolnshire fair, when advertising an opportunity for local lads to test their skills, specified that the house boxers were both white and coloured, presumably hoping the racial element added to the appeal.<sup>81</sup> Black migrant boxers could be paid less too. In 1952, the boxing writer Leslie Bell called for restrictions on licences for black fighters in Britain. He maintained ‘an ugly situation’ was arising as the result of the ‘influx’ of young boxers from the West Indies and the Gold Coast, who were prepared to fight for lower purses, thus putting journeymen ‘British’ boxers out of work. He argued that this was also producing inferior quality programmes for boxing audiences and proposed that the Professional Boxers’ Association vet the licences of coloured boxers to protect the interests of its members.<sup>82</sup> In such a climate, it was little wonder that some boxers from Africa decided to adopt English names to combat their outsider status. One example was Mamodu Nyang, who moved to Leeds from West Africa in 1949, found work as a kitchen porter, and, having boxed as a boy, began fighting semi-professionally but under the name Mickey Johnson.<sup>83</sup>

Concerns around migrant fighters deepened as the 1950s progressed because of conditions within the sport. In September 1952, entertainment duty on boxing promotions was raised from 15 to 30 percent, while, with wages rising across the nation, boxers were also demanding higher purses.<sup>84</sup> Promoters thus faced both higher costs and taxes, a situation not helped by a growing climate of critical negative opinion, focused on their assumed exploitative behaviour and wider medical concerns.<sup>85</sup> Many were simply unable to make boxing pay and gave up the sport, leading to the closure of a number of regional boxing venues, which in itself curtailed the opportunities for professionals to earn a regular income. The number of annual professional tournaments in Britain fell from 793 in 1950 to 157 in 1963. Whereas there had been around 2,000 licensed boxers before the war, by 1963 there were just 509, most of whom were semi-professional.<sup>86</sup>

Unestablished black boxers suffered disproportionately in the climate of limited opportunities. One trainer, involved in the early 1960s, recalled there was a sense that crowds did not generally follow black fighters which meant little interest from promoters. When

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<sup>81</sup> *Lincolnshire Echo*, 24 April 1950.

<sup>82</sup> Leslie Bell, *Inside the Fight Game* (London, 1952), 128-29.

<sup>83</sup> *Lancaster Guardian*, 12 September 1952.

<sup>84</sup> See ‘Brief History of Entertainments Duty,’ [undated: probably 1960], TNA: CUST 153/9, 19-21; *Boxing News*, 26 March 1952.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Note for meeting with representatives of the British Boxing Board of Control,’ 18 February 1957, TNA: CUST 118/569.

<sup>86</sup> *The Times*, 17 January 1956; *Daily Mail*, 18 November 1964.

they were employed, black fighters were often overmatched against more experienced or stronger opponents. The result was that they struggled to build up win records and followings, compounding the perception of black boxers as ‘outsiders’ and ‘no hoppers.’ Worse, with crowds cheering the white fighters, referees could be fooled into believing that black boxers were scoring worse than they actually were.<sup>87</sup> After the early 1950s, contests were no longer explicitly advertised or reported as white versus black; it may be that in the wider climate of growing uncertainty around race anything which spoke too explicitly of tension was unpopular. But it appears that audiences still sometimes treated boxing as metaphorical and actual racial contests, at least when the black fighter was not well-known enough to be judged on more than his skin colour. The wishes, and thus prejudices, of those fans were fulfilled because the assumptions of those who controlled the industry denied many black boxers a fair fight.

Exacerbating this situation was the ruling that limited British titles to those born in the UK. This meant that any immigrant boxer was unable to progress in the normal fashion through the ranks from national to Empire and then world title. Instead, they had to build up reputations more gradually and earn a shot at an Empire title without having a national title to promote them into the limelight. A report in a Nigerian newspaper even claimed that white boxers in Britain were avoiding black opponents because of their stamina. Another report in the same paper advised Nigerian boxers not to come to England because of the limited opportunities they would face.<sup>88</sup> It was not just journeymen boxers that were suffering. In 1956, Liverpool-based Nigerian Hogan Bassey was Empire Champion but finding so few fights that he had to take a job as a mechanics’ assistant.<sup>89</sup> Nor did the situation change as immigration continued apace. As late as 1970, heavyweight Bunny Johnson, born in Jamaica, claimed that West Indian boxers in Britain were not given enough publicity or time to develop, having to take fights where they could, rather than against opponents who would help them improve. He did not think the lack of investment from promoters was prejudice but rather ‘because of the myth that coloured boxers don’t sell tickets.’<sup>90</sup> If that was true it was because the industry was stacked against them.

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<sup>87</sup> George Francis and Graeme Fife, *George Francis: Trainer of Champions* (Edinburgh, 1998), 127.

<sup>88</sup> Makinde, *Dick Tiger*, 44, 54-5.

<sup>89</sup> Bassey, *Bassey on Boxing*, 41.

<sup>90</sup> *Boxing News*, 6 November 1970.

## Popular racisms

In 1957 a *Daily Mirror* reporter claimed that for most people who watched boxing skin colour was irrelevant.<sup>91</sup> This reflected a much wider self-denial in British society about the extent of racism. A 1955 study by Anthony Richmond argued that a third of the population were ‘extremely prejudiced,’ strongly resisted any contact with people of colour and generally thought they should not be in the country at all.<sup>92</sup> There were widespread beliefs in inherent racial characteristics such as the poor hygiene, laziness and less developed mental state of the black migrants.<sup>93</sup> This led to distaste for both mixed marriages and living too closely to immigrants. In 1956, a survey in Birmingham suggested that 98 percent of people would not let a room to a black lodger, while 64 percent thought people of colour were of lower intelligence.<sup>94</sup>

The complexity and depth of racial feelings blunted the impact that the popularity of the most successful black boxers had. Black sporting successes had long been interpreted as evidence of ‘natural’ or ‘primordial’ black bodies lacking in the cognitive abilities thought to underpin white superiority.<sup>95</sup> By the 1950s such explicit discussions may have disappeared from the British public sphere but their legacy was still influential. A survey of mid-1950s Brixton suggested that while a south Londoner might be proud to shake hands with a black sporting personality, this did ‘not mean that he will necessarily be willing to have him as a permanent visitor in the home or as a husband for his daughter.’ Indeed, it argued that black proficiency in fields like boxing and jazz ‘tended to reinforce local preconceptions associating colour with violence, sensuality and uninhibited behaviour in general.’ In particular, the survey argued, black successes in boxing and the association between pugilism and flat noses and thick lips increased the belief in a link between race and primitive brutality.<sup>96</sup> Boxing was not just violent, it also showed off black physicality because its performers appeared semi-naked and posed for photographs in postures that emphasised their muscular physiques. The same may have been true for white fighters but audiences might well have taken that for granted whilst at the same time being in awe or even afraid of black

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<sup>91</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 29 August 1957.

<sup>92</sup> Anthony H. Richmond, *The Colour Problem* (London, 1955), 240.

<sup>93</sup> On the continued importance of the Empire in framing such racial ideas see Bill Schwarz, *The White Man’s World* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>94</sup> David Steel, *No Entry: The Background and Implications of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1968* (London, 1969), 31.

<sup>95</sup> Carrington, *Race, Sport and Politics*. Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, ch. 5.

<sup>96</sup> Patterson, *Dark Strangers*, 273, 233-4.

boxers in the same pose, especially after 1958 when the first serious racial violence broke out in postwar Britain generating real fears about the future. Indeed, there was a long history of white audiences looking at black bodies with a mixture of admiration and fear. This gaze was often eroticised, but it was underpinned by a belief in black primordially. In essence, black bodies were believed to be stronger because they were less evolved.<sup>97</sup>

The depth of the imagined link between black men and physical brutality should not be underestimated and it was reinforced through the 1950s by the depictions of savage black men in British colonial films.<sup>98</sup> Inevitably, the white man came out on top in those films and black boxers too were sometimes imagined as lazy, physically flawed and thus ultimately inferior.<sup>99</sup> Boxing was regarded as a skilful art rather than just a demonstration of brute force and Edwardian black fighters had been regarded as lacking the necessary science to be fully effective.<sup>100</sup> Moore has demonstrated how white writers in pre-1918 USA projected ideas that black boxers lacked the grit and toughness of white fighters in order to mute any racial message about their successes in the ring.<sup>101</sup> In post-war Britain too there was a widespread belief that black boxers could not take a punch, or at least one to the body. In 1950 the *Daily Mirror* thus said of Roy Ankarah: 'Here was one coloured man who could take it downstairs.'<sup>102</sup> In contrast, in 1949, a *Daily Telegraph* boxing correspondent, in presumably a reflection on what he thought of the brains of black men, claimed that crowds did not always know 'how hard it was to hurt a coloured man with head punches.'<sup>103</sup> Some went further and consciously dismissed any suggestion that boxing might suggest black physical superiority. An employer in London, who thought his 'niggers' worked well as long as they were directed, told a social investigator:

It will take us thousands of years to get them where the white man is now. People talk about the American Negro boxers, but you've got to remember they've had at least three generations of American culture and training, really these coloured races are

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Richard Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War: Race, Masculinity and the Development of National Consciousness* (Manchester, 2004), pp.100-102.

<sup>98</sup> Wendy Webster, 'There'll always be an England: representations of colonial wars and immigration, 1948-68,' *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (October 2001): 557-84, at 574-5.

<sup>99</sup> Collins, 'Pride and Prejudice'; Webster, 'Colonial wars and immigration,' 574; Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, 134.

<sup>100</sup> Smith, *Jamaican Volunteers*, 106.

<sup>101</sup> Moore, *I Fight for a Living*, ch. 5.

<sup>102</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 31 July 1950.

<sup>103</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 4 February 1949.

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In 1958, the *Aberdeen Evening Express* even tried to explain away the dominance of black boxers by arguing that it said much ‘for the teaching of the white boxing masters over the years that to-day their coloured pupils practically rule the world’s boxing titles’.<sup>105</sup> Others simply chose to dismiss black boxing achievements by recourse to other stereotypes around immigrants. In 1951, the *Sunday Dispatch* ran an article complaining that British boxing was ‘going black’ and that these boxers were involved with racketeers and used drugs for courage.<sup>106</sup>

Yet it was such attitudes that made boxing so important for black fighters and a wider black audience. In the home nations of migrant fighters, which were still British colonies but now seeking independence, successes in the ring were seen as examples of the potential of the nation. Jan Dunzendorfer has argued that in Ghana, Ankarah’s 1951 Empire title victory was much celebrated as ‘a shining example for the possibilities that sport was giving to the colonial subaltern, namely to beat the British at their own game’.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, across Africa, the best international black fighters, regardless of nationality, were increasingly seen as ‘black heroes aiding in the liberation of all black peoples’.<sup>108</sup> Frantz Fanon claimed, that in colonial societies the ‘native’ learns to ‘stay in his place’ and hence his dreams are ‘always of muscular prowess ... of action and of aggression’, of escaping that place.<sup>109</sup> Victories like Ankarah’s can be seen as a fulfilment of that but whether boxers themselves thought in such terms is a different matter. Given how dependent they were on white promoters and audiences to advance their careers, it would have been difficult to say anything too racialized or political in public. In essence, the inequalities in the sport seem to have denied them the opportunity to voice their feelings. As was so often the case, within the UK and in the

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Banton, *The Coloured Quarter: Negro Immigrants in an English City* (London, 1955), 183.

<sup>105</sup> *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 16 August 1958.

<sup>106</sup> Cited in Makinde, *Dick Tiger*, 37.

<sup>107</sup> Jan Dunzendorfer, ‘Ethnicized boxing: the tale of Ghana’s boxing roots in local martial art’, *Sport in Society*, 17, 8 (2013), 1015-1029, 1023. Also see Michael Gennaro, ‘‘Empire boxers are the goods’: race, boxing, and Nigerians in the Black Atlantic,’ Online at [https://www.academia.edu/33023553/EMPIRE\\_BOXERS\\_ARE\\_THE\\_GOODS\\_RACE\\_BOXING\\_AND\\_NIGERIANS\\_IN\\_THE\\_BLACK\\_ATLANTIC](https://www.academia.edu/33023553/EMPIRE_BOXERS_ARE_THE_GOODS_RACE_BOXING_AND_NIGERIANS_IN_THE_BLACK_ATLANTIC) [accessed 1 August 2018]

and Anene Ejikeme, ‘Hogan ‘Kid’ Bassey: Nigerian Icon,’ in *Emerging Themes and Methods in African Studies*, ed. Tyoin Falola and Adam Paddock (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2008).

<sup>108</sup> Tyler Fleming, ‘Now the African reigns supreme’: The rise of African boxing on the Witwatersrand, 1924–1959, *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 28:1 (2011), 47-62, 56.

<sup>109</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 1963), p. 40.

Empire, when faced with racial discrimination or opportunities to demonstrate how wrong it was, it was often more pragmatic to keep quiet. Certainly, there were black intellectuals able and willing to speak out, but the working-class individual struggling to make a living did not have that luxury and thus the political views of black boxers like Ankarah are lost. Racism not only framed the experiences of black boxers but their archival traces too. The same became true of white sources. As the 1950s progressed, and the media became more sensitive to racial issues, such explicit rhetoric around race faded in the national press. That was evident in the reporting of a 1955 sexual trial involving Roy Ankarah, the former black British Empire featherweight champion who had once been so popular in Nottingham. Along with another boxer from Ghana, he was charged with offences against underage girls in Glasgow. A picture emerged during the trial of complex personal relationships and teenage girls attracted to their fame. Ankarah protested his innocence but was found guilty of one of the five charges and sentenced to six months.<sup>110</sup> This could have been used to confirm the powerful stereotype that black men were sexually aggressive and irresponsible.<sup>111</sup> Yet, despite Ankarah's fame and the wider critical press interest in the sex lives of black men, the press reporting was sober and unsensational. The local press was often keen to ensure that overt racialized comments that might fuel tensions were kept out of its pages but the unwillingness to condemn Ankarah might also owe something to the distaste some had towards white women who cavorted with black men, even if they were underage. Nonetheless, whatever approach, journalists took, readers could come to their own conclusions from stories of black boxers committing crimes and or even just beating white fighters.<sup>112</sup>

The fading of racialized comment from boxing's press coverage after the early 1950s also reflected how racial prejudice was not straightforward. Migrants complained of being ignored and stared at but there could also be friendliness and some of the slights were not deliberate. Contemporary studies noted an ambivalence, contradiction, and hypocrisy in race

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<sup>110</sup> *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 17 January 1955, 9 May 1955, 11 May 1955. *Daily Mirror*, 17 January, 10 May 1955.

<sup>111</sup> Collins, 'Pride and Prejudice.'

<sup>112</sup> John Davis, 'Containing Racism? The London Experience, 1957–1968', in Robin D. G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck (eds), *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 125-46. For sex and black men in the British press see Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers: Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press* (Oxford, 2009), 118-20.



relations, where discrimination was both widely disapproved of and practised.<sup>113</sup> A 1955 study summed up the common attitude of white Britons as ‘denying full social equality to the Negro but being very friendly, if patronizing towards him, provided he keeps his distance.’<sup>114</sup> Even then, it is important not to exaggerate the extent of outright hostility. Richmond’s 1955 study argued that a third of the population was tolerant of black people and a 1961 edition suggested that his earlier claim for a third of people being extremely prejudiced was an overstatement.<sup>115</sup> A late 1950s survey found that three-quarters of white respondents agreed that ‘Coloured people are just as good as us when they have the same training and opportunities,’ while two thirds thought there would be no colour problem if everyone behaved in a more Christian way.<sup>116</sup> Nonetheless, the framing of these questions revealed the clear perception that there was a colour problem, that immigration was something to tolerate, and that, as things stood, black was not the equal of white.

Boxing offered some challenge to this. As immigration made questions of colour and prejudice a matter of considerable public and private debate, people involved in the sport at any level must have made connections between race and their experience of the sport. Felix Fuhg has argued that music and night clubs ‘contained the potential to overcome supposed racial boundaries through common tastes and common experience’, even if they did not ultimately overcome unequal power relationships or a sense of otherness.<sup>117</sup> This was evident in boxing too. One trainer recalled some of his fighters muttering ‘We don’t want any of you lot in here’ when a black teenager turned up at his club. But he also maintained that black and white boys did come together and learned to accept and respect each other.<sup>118</sup> Yet this was probably not a universal experience, especially given how boxing clubs demanded obedience from participants and thus members were subject to not just the rules but also the prejudices of whoever was in charge. Similarly, while the successes of professional black boxers may have reinforced stereotypes around black physicality, they must also surely have had some more positive impacts on how people thought about race. This seems particularly likely given how fighters often became representatives of place, usually labelled by where they lived and cheered on as symbols of local pride in much the same way a football team

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<sup>113</sup> Glass, *Newcomers*, 103-4, 108-111.

<sup>114</sup> Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 192.

<sup>115</sup> Richmond, *The Colour Problem*, 245-6.

<sup>116</sup> Banton, *White and Coloured*, 20.

<sup>117</sup> Felix Fuhg, ‘Ambivalent relationships: London’s youth culture and making of the multi-racial society in the 1960s’, *Britain and the World*, 11, 1 (2018), 4-26.

<sup>118</sup> Francis and Fife, *George Francis*, 123-4.

was. Black boxers from abroad probably had some impact on perceptions of race too. When Muhammad Ali became famous in the UK in 1963, there was much dislike of his boasting and arrogance and some of this drew upon racial ideas about black maturity, but he also found many admirers, especially with the young, since, like the Beatles, he encapsulated a challenge to the staid conventions of British society and tradition. Moreover, amongst those who knew the sport well, there was an appreciation of a boxer with the potential to become one of the best ever. When he met Henry Cooper in 1963, the English heavyweight might have been widely encouraged to thrash the loudmouthed American, but it was Ali who showed he had the brains, tactics and style, while it was his white opponent who had nothing much in his arsenal beyond a powerful punch and a fatal weakness of a face that cut easily.<sup>119</sup> Neither Ali, any local boxing hero nor encounters in local gyms were going to change the deeply-embedded racialized nature of British society but there is evidence to suggest that they had some impact on at least a few of those involved.

### **Black and British**

Hogan Bassey wrote in his autobiography that he was ‘a fully fledged ‘Liverpudlian’’ in the late 1950s

and had made a great many friends, and I must say I found the people of Merseyside very hospitable. A few years previously I had sailed into the landing-stage an unknown little fellow, not realising that one day I was to become quite a public hero. It was very pleasing to me to know that I had practically buried the racial prejudice which definitely existed in my early days.<sup>120</sup>

Bassey was awarded a MBE in 1959 and he saw this and his celebrations in Liverpool as evidence of his integration. However, even local popularity was tinged with a continued sense of otherness. When Bassey moved away from Liverpool in 1960, a local newspaper made it front-page news and wrote of ‘tears and cheers’ at the railway station and Bassey’s claims that he had ‘the most wonderful treatment’, kindness and help in the city. But it still called him ‘dusky’ and felt the need to refer to his church going, commitment to family and

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<sup>119</sup> Martin Johnes, ‘Race, National Identity and Reactions to Muhammad Ali in 1960s Britain,’ Paper presented at the 2017 British Society of Sports History annual conference, University of Worcester.

<sup>120</sup> Bassey, *Bassey on Boxing*, 23, 33.

rejection of high living.<sup>121</sup> Many readers would have known that was not how black men were normally thought of. Bassey's autobiography hints that he did not always feel accepted even after his racist encounters had faded. In 1957, Bassey fought in America for the first time and won a bout that put him in line for a world title. He felt he was representing both Britain and Nigeria and was thus aggrieved at the very limited press attention, feeling there was still some form of colour bar in operation.<sup>122</sup> He was right that there was little attempt to adopt migrant fighters as British outside the communities they lived in. In an era when the nations those fighters had moved from were gaining independence, the popular view of people from there as not British was perhaps unsurprising. Immigration also played its role in changing views of those from the colonies. Webster argues that from the late 1950s there was a shift in the media from portraying the Empire as something inclusive to seeing it as a threat to national identity.<sup>123</sup> In boxing, the attempt to distinguish between Britain and Empire was apparent from 1947 when the colour bar was replaced with a regulation that excluded those born outside the UK and Ireland from holding British titles. This not only excluded established British-based boxers such as Bassey and Dick Tiger from holding British titles but also migrants who had taken up the sport after settling in the UK. Joe Bygraves, for example, moved to Liverpool from Jamaica in 1946 as a fifteen-year-old. A decade later, he was Empire heavyweight champion but not eligible to hold the national title of the country where he had spent his adult life. Indeed, the press was still prone to describe him either as a Jamaican or, at best, to jointly attach him to 'Birkenhead and Jamaica.'<sup>124</sup> When in September 1956 he was defeated in New York by local heavyweight Wayne Bethea, *Boxing News* regretted that he had been unable to complete a 'British hat-trick' of wins over Americans, while still labelling him as 'Joe Bygraves of Jamaica.'<sup>125</sup>

This might have seemed innocuous to boxing writers but such labelling provided what Perry has called 'a public vocabulary of non-belonging' where migrants were denied the 'rights, respects and recognition' they should have been afforded as British citizens.<sup>126</sup> In other words, describing boxers like Bygraves as immigrants turned them into outsiders in a

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<sup>121</sup> *Liverpool Echo*, 15 March 1960. For more on wider attitudes to 'coloured' immigrants in 1950s Liverpool, see John Belchem, *Before the Windrush: Race Relations in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Liverpool* (Liverpool, 2014), ch. 5.

<sup>122</sup> Bassey, *Bassey on Boxing*, 54.

<sup>123</sup> Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939-1965* (Oxford, 2005), chs. 5 and 6.

<sup>124</sup> *Boxing News*, 13 April 1956; 18 May 1956; 29 June 1956.

<sup>125</sup> *Boxing News*, 28 September 1956.

<sup>126</sup> Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 22.

land where they had full citizenship. It also reflected a wider position where immigration had problematized the idea that it was possible to be black and British. The 1948 Nationality Act had never been intended to bestow British citizenship on the peoples of the Empire. Instead, it had been a specific response to the white dominions developing their own citizenship and was intended to ensure the UK remained the heart of the emerging Commonwealth. Thus, whatever the act said, in the popular mind, the ‘‘real’ British people were white.’<sup>127</sup> That sense intensified over the next two decades leading to, as Schwarz has argued, a ‘re-racialization’ of English identity in the late 1950s and 1960s.<sup>128</sup> In other words, white Britons found a renewed sense of common identity by their sense of difference to black immigrants. It is perhaps significant that Dick Tiger and Hogan Bassey, the most talented of the 1950s immigrants who came to the UK to box, both left for America to develop their careers. When there were better financial opportunities elsewhere, there was little point staying in a nation that did not consider you a part of it.

There was limited evidence in contemporary studies of different attitudes to those of colour who were born in the UK and those who were immigrants.<sup>129</sup> However, such distinctions were often lost and British-born black men and women were often discriminated against or spoken to as immigrants. They consequently felt they did not belong and could become ‘bitter, cynical, and resentful.’<sup>130</sup> Black boxers born in Britain also found themselves regarded as different and other. One example was Joe Erskine, who was born in Cardiff and became Britain’s first black heavyweight champion in 1956, adding the Empire title a year later. Press reporting in England tended to refer to him as a Welshman but within Wales his treatment could be more complex.<sup>131</sup> In 1956, the *Western Mail* proclaimed he ‘is as proud of Wales as any thoroughbred from the Principality.’<sup>132</sup> Although the article never mentioned his colour, the implication was that Erskine was not as Welsh as others, however proud he might be. Erskine himself was only too aware of his outsider status. He remarked ‘my father was a West Indian, my mother a local girl. I am a half-caste, but in the Bay we are

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<sup>127</sup> Paul, ‘The politics of citizenship,’ 462. Cf. Waters, ‘Dark strangers,’ 208.

<sup>128</sup> Schwarz, ‘The only white man in there’.

<sup>129</sup> Banton, *The Coloured Quarter*, 188.

<sup>130</sup> Anthony H. Richmond, *The Colour Problem: A Study of Race Relations* (London, 1961 edition), 291.

<sup>131</sup> The *Boxing News* report of his British title win over Johnny Williams referred to Erskine’s ‘Calypso-chanting ‘Tiger Bay’ admirers’ but made no direct reference to colour. *Boxing News*, 31 August 1956.

<sup>132</sup> *Western Mail*, 9 May 1956.

all one nation.’<sup>133</sup> This was a reference to ‘Tiger Bay’, the racially mixed area around Cardiff docks. Such comments about its racial harmony were common but behind them was always the lived experience that this was not the case in other parts of the city. Another fighter from ‘Tiger Bay’ was David Hughes, whose father was a Trinidadian seaman. He used his colour to establish a distinctive professional identity and fought as ‘Darkie Hughes’ from 1953 to 1964. At the start of the 1960s, he had to wait a year for a chance to fight for the British title that his ranking entitled him to.<sup>134</sup> His manager speculated that the BBBC was operating an unofficial colour bar, although the board rejected this as ‘ridiculous’<sup>135</sup> Such experiences reflected the peculiar ‘blend of tolerance and intolerance [and]... animosity and friendliness’ described by Glass in 1960, which made it possible for a black man with equal citizenship to feel that ‘he is not really regarded as British; he does not really belong.’<sup>136</sup>

Throughout the 1950s, sections of the government worried about immigration, shared the notion that Britishness was essentially a white identity, and tried to unofficially control and limit the numbers of migrants.<sup>137</sup> The fear of damaging relations with the Commonwealth discouraged anything more substantial but the climate at home changed in 1958 when localized tensions boiled over into race riots in Notting Hill. With one eye on rising racial tensions in the USA, the fear of further unrest now prompted action to officially curb immigration, especially since immigration numbers were continuing to rise.<sup>138</sup> When legislation finally came in 1962, it was followed by the 1965 Race Relations Act, an act intended to compensate for the immigration limits by improving the rights of those already in the UK but which has been much criticized for its limited scope.<sup>139</sup> In the new atmosphere of recognising racial rights, boxing too began to consider its position. Managers with black fighters in their stables had been pressurizing the BBBC for a change in the rules. The

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<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Peter Stead, ‘Entry of the heavyweights: Erskine and Richardson,’ in *Wales and its Boxers: The Fighting Tradition*, ed. Peter Stead and Gareth Williams (Cardiff, 2008), 135-47, at 140.

<sup>134</sup> He claimed this was a nickname that had stuck from his childhood, when he had been the only black pupil at his school. *Daily Mail*, 28 September 1961.

<sup>135</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 1 August 1961.

<sup>136</sup> Glass, *Newcomers*, 110-11.

<sup>137</sup> David Welsh, ‘The Principle of the Thing: The Conservative Government and the Control of Commonwealth Immigration, 1957-1959,’ *Contemporary British History* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 51-79; Carter et al, ‘The 1951-1955 Conservative government’; John Solomos, *Race and Racism in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2003), chapter 3.

<sup>138</sup> Dennis Dean, ‘The Conservative government and the 1961 Commonwealth Immigration Act: the inside story,’ *Race & Class* 35, no. 2 (October 1993), 57-74. Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, ch. 6.

<sup>139</sup> For a discussion see Gavin Schaffer, ‘Legislating Against Hatred: Meaning and Motive in Section Six of the Race Relations Act of 1965,’ *Twentieth Century British History* 25, no. 2 (June 2014): 251-75.

Board's defence was that there was a danger that immigrant boxers might secure a British title and then leave the country, making it difficult to compel them to defend it. As the trainer of Bunny Sterling, who had taken up boxing after moving as a child to the UK from Jamaica, argued, this was a fundamental failure to understand that migrants were loyal to Britain and not simply using the country for its opportunities.<sup>140</sup> The Board relented in 1968 and introduced a ten-year residential qualifying rule. This was still five years longer than the term of residence required for British citizenship by the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act but it was nonetheless another small step in the gradual acceptance of black migrants as British.

In 1970, Sterling became the first black migrant to hold a professional British title. Despite having lived in the UK since he was seven, he continued to be sometimes described by the press as a Jamaican.<sup>141</sup> Before the fight, Sterling told the press that if he won it would be 'a great boost for coloured immigrant sportsmen in Britain. A lot of them get very despondent, particularly in boxing where more often than not they are used as substitutes.' The paper pointed to the suggestion that some promoters thought 'coloured immigrant boxers' were 'poison' at the box office. Sterling disagreed and claimed 'boxing fans don't care what a fighter's colour is. If he's good they want to watch him.'<sup>142</sup> Yet the London crowd that watched his British title win booed and jeered; his trainer received hate mail calling him a 'Nigger lover.'<sup>143</sup> Once again boxing had provided symbolic evidence that people of colour had a place within British society but also that this was far from universally welcomed.

## Conclusion

Race was a fluid concept in the first two decades of large-scale immigration to the UK. The abolition of boxing's colour bar was a significant acknowledgement that formal mechanisms of racial exclusion were morally wrong and politically dangerous. Small in number and generally not regarded as threatening to the sport or wider society, the most successful black boxers in the wake of the abolition were celebrated as representatives of their local community and the wider nation. But, as immigration increased during the 1950s, and professional boxing declined as an industry, instances of poor treatment and marginalization

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<sup>140</sup> Francis and Fife, *George Francis*, 120-1. Surveys showed the vast majority of Jamaicans for example felt British before moving to the UK. Robert Winder, *Bloody Foreigners: The Story of Immigration to Britain* (London, 2005), 358.

<sup>141</sup> For example, *The Times*, 9 September 1970 and 24 October 1967.

<sup>142</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 8 September 1970.

<sup>143</sup> Francis and Fife, *George Francis*, 132-3.

became more common and black fighters often found themselves ostracized and denied the opportunity to compete for British titles. The most successful did overcome this and established themselves as local heroes illustrating how racism was not universal. However, in an era when British identity was clearly racialized, these black fighters were not celebrated as national heroes. The impact of their successes was also curtailed by it happening in a context that supported wider prejudices that black men were physical and violent. As such, black successes in the ring probably reinforced the popular idea that racial differences were real and profound. Boxing thus became part of the construction of race in post-war British society.

As sometimes acknowledged at the time, it was often fiction that best portrayed the nuances of racial constructions.<sup>144</sup> This is evident in the 1953 mass market novel *The Fight*.<sup>145</sup> Written by Vernon Scannell, a former professional boxer, it centres on a fight between a white British Empire middleweight champion, and Babe Simon, a black American world champion. Race runs through *The Fight* as an undercurrent. Discussions of Simon's abilities and personality recur and there is a clear acceptance that he is a fighter of exceptional talent. Nonetheless, many male characters, including those in awe of Simon, repeatedly refer to him as a 'nigger.' The novel's fight fans, lacking the nuanced appreciation of Simon's skills evident to those within the fight game, are even cruder in their prejudice and shared the wider contradictory view of black men as simultaneously physically stronger and weaker:

'This fella Simon might injure him. It's happened before. Injure him serious: blind him or something. These niggers are different. They ain't like us. Primitive, that's what they are.'

'Savages,' his companion contributed.<sup>146</sup>

'But they're all the same, these niggers,' the customer was saying, 'no guts. Hit them hard and in the right place and they'll pack up straight away. In the belly. That's where they can't take it ... You've only got to stand up to them and they fold up. No

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<sup>144</sup> Harold Pollins, 'Coloured people in post-war English literature,' *Race & Class*, 1, no. 2 (April 1959): 3-13.

<sup>145</sup> Vernon Scannell, *The Fight* (London, 1953)

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

guts.’<sup>147</sup>

Amongst women, attitudes towards Simon are complicated by his good looks and the contemporary simultaneous attraction to and revulsion of racial difference and male black bodies.<sup>148</sup> They are more prone to talk of Simon as ‘coloured’ rather than use more abusive racial language but they still have an acute awareness of him as different. One remarks ‘Looks handsome – for a negro, I mean.’ Another is scandalized when her friend comments on Simon’s good looks: ‘Irene! He’s a black man!’ To which her friend replies, ‘Well, what if he is? I think he’s smashing.’<sup>149</sup>

Boxing is thus a reminder of how public celebrations of black achievements did not undermine the sense of racial otherness that was common amongst both those who accepted and were angry at immigration. Nonetheless, at a time when race relations and British identity were in flux, when race was generally discussed in the media as a problem, and when most of the British population did not have any first-hand contact with anyone of colour because of the spatially concentrated nature of immigration, the success of black boxers must have at least opened up new dialogues around race and British culture.<sup>150</sup> Paul Gilroy has argued that later black British athletes should be appreciated for ‘the fleeting, prefigurative glimpses of a different nation that they have unwittingly provided’.<sup>151</sup> The same was true of black boxers of the 1950s and 1960s. Despite the way they were ‘othered’ and discriminated against, the most talented of them did rise to the heights of sport, challenging the prejudices around them, earning good money in the process, and signalling the arrival of a different vision of Britain. Like West Indian cricket, these triumphs in a physical battle probably had symbolic power for the wider black population in the UK and beyond. No matter how ambivalent and contained white attitudes towards them were, boxing offered its most successful financial and physical liberation.

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>148</sup> On hostility to inter-race sexual relations see Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939-65* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 153-9.

<sup>149</sup> Scannell, *The Fight*, 34, 148.

<sup>150</sup> For the importance of television in forming race relations see Rob Waters, ‘Black power on the telly: America, television, and race in 1960s and 1970s Britain,’ *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 4 (2015): 947-70. For black images on television see Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: A History of Black and Asian Images on British Television* (London, 2002) and Gavin Schaffer, *The Vision of a Nation: Making Multiculturalism on British Television, 1960-80* (Basingstoke, 2014).

<sup>151</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 125.



The long-term impacts of this, however, were limited in an industry where its rich stars were preyed upon by advisers, hangers on and others, and in a society where racial prejudices were rife. The novelist Caryl Phillips' part-fictional portrayal of Turpin's life encapsulates the resulting ambiguity, emphasising his unease, awkwardness and confusion even at the moment that he became world champion in 1951. Momentarily the 'most famous man in England,'<sup>152</sup> Turpin, like other black boxers in the post-war period, struggled to make sense of his life as 'other' in a sport and a culture that so often claimed to be colour-blind but acted otherwise. By 1966, he was bankrupt and, after attempting to kill his baby daughter, he committed suicide. Perhaps race was not part of the reason for his tragic fall from grace but the equality that the abolition of the colour bar had promised was certainly still a mirage.

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<sup>152</sup> Caryl Phillips, *Foreigners* (New York, 2008), 81.