Gene Tunney: American Warrior

by Kelly Nicholson

The Irish Wave

In his day, as more than one author has taken note, he was something peculiar. Gene Tunney was a begrudged heavyweight champion; reserved in manner, chiseled pretty, he was a world-beater who enjoyed lyric poetry.

In the eyes of some he was an elitist. Worse yet, he was the man who twice worked his moves, in sly fashion, upon *bona fide* slugger Jack Dempsey. All told, he was a taste that much of 1920s America never did acquire. To this day, some imagine, he was lower-case champion, a restrained beat in a line of titans that arose in the 19th century and continued, in pounding sequence, through the likes of Dempsey, Joe Louis, and Rocky Marciano.

Let it be said up front, not everything in the pages ahead will be brand new to those who know their fight history. In recent years Gene Tunney has had his defenders, some of whom gave impetus to this discussion. Yet he merits an added word, I believe, on two counts: First, like many past heroes, he was good enough at what he did to allow a revisit. And second, for all the cold distance he kept from press and public, he was likely one of the most virtuous men ever to flourish in his sport. Indeed, on looking over his life, through his own eyes and the eyes of those who knew him, this writer counts him as one of the most remarkable specimens of manhood ever reared upon his native soil.

To see him in context, we might go back a little further. In 1845, veritable Black Death, in the form of a potato famine, had gripped Ireland. By mid-century the death toll would reach two million. As lives and families were cruelly broken, many fled that cursed ground to what was often a second-class existence in England. Others made their way west, an ethnic wave on the great salt water, to Ellis Island.

John Tunney, last of 13 children, was born in 1859 on a bleak stretch of the old country. Worth a story in his own right, John came of age early when he left the isle at eleven to work as a cabin boy in the Merchant Marine. By 18, as his grandson Jay notes, he was "feisty, hard-drinking, stubborn, quick with an opinion and fast with his fists." If he needed provocation, it was around – fair complexion and reddish hair, marks of his Viking ancestry, were a frequent cause. In time John would head to America, where opportunity seemed to beckon. In 1893, at age 34, he married fellow arrival Mary Lydon. Their third child of seven, born on May 25, 1897, in the Hell's Kitchen district, was a boy, whom they named James Joseph.

Childhood: And Magical Escape

Five months later, the family moved to an apartment flat in Greenwich Village. If that name is familiar, this was in fact the same stretch of lower west Manhattan that would enjoy a vogue, in decades to come, as a hamlet of *nouveau* art and hip street counter-fashion. But not so then – for in that day the Village was a welter of flesh and tenements, a boozy cauldron of Irish sweat labor and agony that forged strength in its inhabitants.

From early on, James Joseph – he was effectively renamed *Gene* by a younger infant sibling – was a potent mix of sense and spirit. Fiercely bright, he loved boxing, and the deft trick of avoiding a blow while getting one home with force by an alignment of weight and muscle. Gene would not pick fights, but – shades of John – he could not abide an insult or a goading, nor could he tolerate an injustice. Time and again he came home sorely bruised.

"My mother," he would recall, "wanted me to become a priest, as so many an Irish mother has aspired for her son." His father was an admirer of a rough hewn Irish American phenomenon named John L. Sullivan. John Tunney had in addition an odd streak of intellectual pride, which often came to the fore – heaven help any dissenters – at the dinner table. Young Gene, in his own way, took something from each side of that personality.

By eleven or twelve, each Tunney child had employment, every nickel getting handed over to "Nana" for her expenses. Gene was a butcher's boy at a local market, getting $2.50 a week to take orders in the morning and make deliveries in the afternoon. When he showed up late at school, he got a nun's ruler across his knuckles. It paled next to what he got if he crossed the line at home.

"Bring *the belt*."

This was the signal for Gene to drop his trousers and assume the position against the kitchen table. John Tunney worked the wharf six days a week. He drank hard and he hit like murder, and if Gene ever needed a lesson in withstanding hurt, he got it then. He gripped hold and took each blow, each hiss of that whip and its impact, refusing to weep as his backside and his legs paid testament to how John swung that length of hide. If he broke down – showed *weakness* – it was afterward in the darkness of his room.

And through it all, despite the abuse, Gene had some measure of love for this man, who could amaze him with tales of men like Sullivan and his nemesis James J. Corbett, fellow sons of Eire who were heroes to their kinsmen at the outset of modern ring tradition. When Gene received a set of boxing gloves for his tenth birthday, it was a catalyst releasing energy without limit.

Around his twelfth year came a dramatic glimpse of something beyond that cramped flat and the little mire in which it lay. It was occasioned by a chance slip and fall that gashed his leg, while Gene was running errands, on a stray butcher's knife. Nana, coming from home, wrapped the wound in her petticoats and bodily hauled her son six blocks to a hospital emergency room.

Dr. Frederick Van Vliet, who greeted mother and son with pleasant authority in his white coat, was unlike anyone he had met before. The doctor treated the injury, and he took note, in the process, of his young patient's aptitude. Soon Gene was his right hand man, relaying messages and toting the black bag when it was needed.

In Van Vliet's office were shelves of books. Medicine, novels, science, and history – volumes that soon took Gene into a world beyond any he had fathomed. In coming months, the doctor encouraged him, talked with him, urged him to pursue literature – and boxing, besides. Such was Van Vliet's impact on his young comrade that years after his passing, Gene could walk by his house still remembering that kindness.

Reading now became an escape, lifting him out of anger and poverty – away from vulgar classmates, from the school's wrathful disciplinarian Christian Brothers, and the father who was *hell to pay* after. Books, and the men and women who wrote them, became his friends. In Alexandre Dumas and James Fenimore Cooper he found not only intrigue, but ideals of masculine honor.

Gene quit school at 15. He began pulling down five dollars a week as an office boy with the Ocean Steamship Company near the neighborhood piers. When able, he entered onto makeshift fight cards that paired young aspirants from around the area. While money might factor into these shows, Gene's standard compensation was a post-fight ginger ale with a ham sandwich. Early on, too, in his off hours, he was digesting English and mathematics, work that offered little immediate reward yet paid back in time.

Night, as his own son Jay explains, was his time for now. In its quieting darkness, "the expanse of the Hudson became a shimmering black belt cutting off the empty steamship office from the rest of the world." When paperwork was done, Gene stayed for awhile, pulling on gloves and acting out battles in a reality all his own. In daylight hours that river was "an ever-changing panorama of light and motion" that hinted beyond present limit.

A man who has lived one day in the world, says Camus' antihero Meursault in a classic novel called ***The Stranger***, has enough, in principle, to occupy him for a century. Were he himself imprisoned inside a dead hollow tree, this odd figure claims, with just a patch of sky overhead, he would yet find something of interest. While Tunney bears little resemblance to the character, he might evoke one comparison by his own deep inner wellspring. At that time there was no tech-smart training industry, no designer gym-wear with fitness experts dealing advice on every other city block. But that did not prevent a young New Yorker, if he were creative, from bearing down upon his own straps. Clad in street shoes, Gene found profitable work in racing the neighborhood bus. He could fashion a punching target out of a pillow, a weighted turkey's crop (granted, this one was short-lived), or a shoe hung by strings from a doorway transom.

What was more, he could become stronger of mind. "I felt," he would say later, "I could make myself do anything. I could will anything to come true." He kept a notebook (as he would all his life) in which he logged, in tireless fashion, exact definitions of new words that strayed into his visual field. Late at night, he would sometimes sit in the kitchen and lay out hundreds of matches in a row, ends opposite, one to another, then reverse their direction. Before entering the house, no matter how tired, he might add to his effort an extra lap around the block. Then, in his bedroom, while two brothers slept, he stood on a chair in the blackness and counted inaudibly to 500 or 1,000.

Early Ring Education

Gene loved to mix it up with the gloves. But until now it had been play. The action took a serious turn when he was invited one day to trade leather in a school gymnasium with local professional Willy Green. Well seasoned at 26, Willy was in a comeback mode after a fling with the stage. Smart of dress, spilling with swagger, he was not one to spare a fuzz-cheeked novice. At the call to action, he drilled his 16-year old sparmate with left and right, sending Gene's head against the wall.

Again, that unflinching resolve: The two young gladiators would meet, in time, in several venues, waging war on one occasion in the kitchen space at the apartment of a mutual friend. Later they went at it on a weekly basis at a gym where Willy worked as a coach. For awhile it was perverse fun for locals to watch Gene give his mentor target practice. Yet Gene dug in, as he would so many times in his life, looking not for a way out, but for a way up, until one day the balance of trade began to shift. In time, he was anticipating his foe's moves and countering them. There came a day, at last, when Willy could not lay a glove on him.

At 18, Gene had his first fight on record, a scheduled ten-rounder against a journeyman named Bobby Dawson at the Sharkey Athletic Club. Fading in the middle rounds of a bruising go, he pulled it out with a haymaker, brought up from the floor, that felled his man at the end of the seventh. Though saved by the bell, Bobby stayed sitting when the next *clang* sounded. Gene collected $18, nearly equaling what John made for a week on the docks.

The War – and the Rise of Jack Dempsey

At this time, a massive conflict raged in Europe, one that exceeded in scale anything in recent world memory. In April of 1917, America entered the fray. On the second day of May in 1918, a little shy of 21, with a handful of fights under his belt, Tunney joined the U. S. Marine Corps.

When John got wind of it he was irate. The argument escalated, and later that day a family war that had been brewing, perhaps, for ten years, took place in the basement of that building where father and son donned leather and had at it. When it was over, there was no doubt as to which man, in fistic terms, was better. This time it was Gene who did the belting.

Image courtesy of BoxRec

Still, for all that he had suffered at John's hands, up there in that flat, Gene showed restraint, allowing the older man to bow out with a measure of dignity. But whatever rapport he might have once had with him was ruptured, and there was no healing it. John would die a few years later without the gap being bridged.

The time overseas served Gene well in more ways than one. It taught him on a personal level about friendship and humility. It also gave him opportunity: The great mobilization had left more manpower on the scene than was needed, as it turned out, when the fighting waned. With time and men to spare, there was organized in France a massive boxing tournament among the Allied Expeditionary Forces. Gene, now reaching close to 6'2, joined up as a light-heavyweight.

In this competition he had an epiphany. "To have a purpose," he would say in looking back, "on which to concentrate your energies means everything. It acts like an inner force that focuses all the power that you possess." To have such a purpose, Gene maintained, was half the battle in any major undertaking. Boxing, he now realized, could be more than a pastime. During the AEF elimination, in which he had to climb through the ropes some 20 times, he found, as he would say, his true start in life.

At this time, too, a young heavyweight back home, out of Manassa, Colorado, was boring a hole in the division. No dancer, no stylist, William Harrison "Jack" Dempsey was a pulverizer, a sun-burnished 6'1 man-hammer of grizzle and steel with killing strength in each hand.

Jack liked to fight out of a crouch, chin tucked and rocking his way inside. His favorite tactic was a right hand to the body, followed by a left upstairs. Any question of whether he was for real got answered in late July of 1918, when the Coloradan, riding a streak of fast wins, collided with a fellow comer out of Minnesota.

At 6'7, Fred Fulton was a towering prospect with a hook of his own like the swing of Shoeless Joe Jackson. Fred could clout with a vengeance, and his reach seemed to extend half-way across the ring. But this time he was beaten to the draw. In the first round, Jack hit pay-dirt with what he would call the hardest shot he ever landed, an up-hurled left hand grenade that caught the fair-haired albatross smack on his chin and sent him down cold on the ring apron. Dempsey now had the eye and the ear of the sporting press.

Image courtesy of BoxRec

Word soon crossed the water. How good was he? Gene's immediate commander Corporal McReynolds had done some writing about the fighters of the day – he had seen Jack in the ring and had even reffed one of his bouts. During an idle moment, as they were looking out aboard ship at castles on the Rhine, he piqued Private Tunney's interest with the claim that Dempsey would cut down the giant Jess Willard when they fought for the title.

"What's he like?" asked Gene.

"He's a big Jack Dillon," came the reply.

This was no minor compliment. Dillon, a pitiless banger, had struck fear into some of the best men in the middleweight division. But that answer set Gene's wheels turning. Hadn't Dillon, in turn, been outboxed by the great Mike Gibbons? McReynolds, in fact, had covered the bout. He agreed that Gibbons, the aptly named St. Paul Phantom, had found a solution to Dillon. So likewise, Gene imagined, there might be a way to handle even an animal like Dempsey.

The Manassa Mauler

In the spring of 1919, Tunney won the AEF light-heavyweight championship. Back home, on Independence Day (in those days, fights were counted a natural accompaniment to fireworks), Jack got his shot at Willard.

Exactly four years earlier, at 33, the big Kansan had gunned down a fancied villain in Jack Johnson, world's first black heavyweight champion. By now, however, Jess had softened some, and he lacked the drive he had carried into that burning Havana, Cuba, ring against Johnson. Still, he was unimpressed with the challenger's string of wins. "What kind of fighter," he asked, "gets knocked out in the first round?"

He himself more or less gave the answer. Dempsey, would say Nat Fleischer in later years, was the greatest two-handed hitter in heavyweight history. Never was it on better display than this afternoon. In the first round he exploded out of that low-down weave with a left hand that caught 6'6 Jess high on his face, fracturing his cheekbone and sending him to the floor.

By the rules of the day, a fighter was not required to go to "the furthest neutral corner," as one hears it today. Jack was able to stand over the stunned champion, laying into him broadside each time that Jess got his gloves off the canvas. The result was that Willard was down, and down again, his face cut to the bone, with teeth, jaw, nose, and ribs getting wrecked in the bargain. At round's end he was left, like a white-skinned ox, sitting in his corner a carved heap, floored for a seventh time and saved by the bell. Revived for the second, and with Dempsey shifting down a notch after that crazed output, Jess absorbed two more rounds of sporadic mauling before his corner tossed the sponge. Finished as a contender, he would be deaf in one ear to the day he died.

Home Again

The Great War ended with a signed pact one November morning in 1918. What now for all the young men who would come home, as time and logistics permitted, to a world that had continued to turn in their absence? Gene would shed his uniform, said Stan Weston, "with what remained of his sixty dollar mustering out pay and … the idea of getting his old job back as bookkeeper for the Central Railroad of Georgia freight depot."

He found, as did many a vet arriving back, that reentry was not easy. After a couple of stabs at nailing down regular income by his old employment, Gene turned straightaway to his real ambition, which was the ring. Old friend and ex-pug Sammy Kelly took on the job as his manager. But Sammy, whose real love was the racetrack, was soon handing him off to Billy Roche, whom the young fighter had known while serving in France.

Yet Billy, too, had other interests, and before long Gene was pushing harder than his helmsman to get work. In 1920 and '21, taking what he could get, he logged 19 fights, winning 13 early and prevailing neatly in the rest. When Roche sought a career turn with an insurance firm, Kelly tried to take the reins again, but soon Gene was under the management of a savvy handler named Frank "Doc" Bagley.

There was one problem that nagged Gene in these years, even as he was running up knockouts that belied his safety-first image – his tender hands. At the close of 1920, with injuries threatening to shut down his career, he determined to find a solution. Deferring gratification for hardship, the fighter spent the early months of the following year in anonymity at a camp in northern Ontario working as a lumberjack for the J. R. Booth Company, seeking the solitude and the strenuous effort, as he put it, that would aid him in his chosen course.

"The gripping of the axe," he would recall, was an "athletics of the hands. The constant toil of fingers and palm in grasping the handle while swinging the heavy blade on a tree trunk was rigorous and specialized

exercise." To this he added strengthening drills of his own creation. Soon afterward a stretch of manual labor in Maine would increase again the might in those hands and allow him, in the process, a healing respite from his own punching power.

During this time, Gene also received valuable advice from an unlikely source, while on a ferryboat ride from Jersey City to New York, when he introduced himself to a fellow passenger whom he recognized – the heavyweight champion of the world.

Now and again a man is called, after a famous story, a *Jekyll and Hyde* for his divided makeup. Dempsey, whose killer instinct by now was legend, was surely a case. Constitutionally unable to pull his punches, he was sheer peril even in a sparring session. During his reign, and years later, when he was long departed from the mainstream, a putative *exhibition* of the sweet science might end with Jack icing his co-star in the first round. Yet outside the ring, he was courteous, and genuinely so, to anyone who made his acquaintance. In their conversation, Gene had a presage of the friendship he would have with this man, away from the arena in years ahead, when Dempsey examined his right hand and showed him how to wrap the knuckles so that the point of stress would be spared full impact. (Thus did the champion, said Gene, add strength to the very hand with which he would one day contend.)

Soon he was pounding a heavy bag filled with sand to test the results. While Gene would never be completely free of hand trouble, he had taken a leap forward. He returned to action in June of 1921 with a resounding first-round knockout of Johnny "Young" Ambrose and set to move full-speed ahead.

American Light-Heavyweight Champion

On October 15, 1921, Tunney fought for the first time at Madison Square Garden (located at 26th Street and Madison Avenue, this one would be the second of four such incarnations), winning by a knockout over Pittsburgh contender Jack Burke. It earned him a shot at the same locale against seasoned titleholder Battling Levinsky for the American light-heavyweight championship.

On the 13th of January in 1922, some 14,228 fans, hitherto the largest crowd ever to attend the Garden, saw Gene give a masterful exhibition. Perhaps his most anxious moment came in the twelfth and final round, when Levinsky, whipped pillar to post, muttered pathetically "Please let me stay, Gene." With the fight all but done, Tunney stalled, moved by his plea, whereupon the champion rewarded him, flush on the mouth, with the last good right hand he had left. Though irked (he would laugh about it later), Gene bided his time as the round neared its close, allowing Bat to finish upright.

The scoring was a foregone conclusion. Gene was thus now the target of other young challengers – and one veteran. At 27, Edward Henry "Harry" Greb had logged more than two hundred bouts against all comers. Fearless, rough in style, erratic and relentless, he had staying power that defied comprehension. Left and right, inside and out, sometimes aided by the cranial "third fist" that fighters might employ in those fight-often freewheeling days, he ran roughshod over any man near his size. As to the really big ones, whom he also bested, he would say, "they tend to get in their own way." Some maintain, to this day, that he was as good, for his weight, as any man who ever laced up the gloves.

The Pittsburg Windmill

"Few human beings," said Gene, "have fought each other more savagely or more often than Harry Greb and I." The two would become friends outside the ring, as was Gene's tendency with even his bitterest rivals, and Harry's tendency, as well. But never would Gene get a going over as he did when they met for the American light-heavyweight title on May 23, 1922, in the Garden.

Legend has it that Mutius Scaevola, a warrior of the Roman Republic, was once apprehended behind enemy lines and threatened with execution. In contempt for his mortal fate, it is said, he extended his hand over a fire that blazed in the camp, searing his flesh and so impressing his captors that they spared his life. One might be reminded of this steel-hard show when reading (would that there were footage) of Gene's first bout with the Pittsburgh fighter whom scribes likened to a wind-driven blade.

Image courtesy of BoxRec

Gene, by his own reckoning, carried a handicap going into the fight, suffering a cut over his left eye in the late stages of training that figured to open if it suffered abuse. The old hand fractures, as he would say, had never healed as neatly as they should have, and Bagley injected each of his dukes anxiously with Novocain in the dressing room prior to the fight. He then shot adrenaline chloride into the cut area to reduce the flow of blood if the wound was reopened. Doc packed with him also a solution of brandy and orange juice to sustain his fighter's strength if he took to bleeding heavily in the fight.

And bleed, *did he* – right off, Greb fractured his nose with a left hand, a bull's-eye shot that would have Gene's face wet with crimson for the next hour. Before the bell rang, that half-healed cut, too, came streaming. In the third round Greb, conceding at 162 some twelve pounds to the champion, tore him open over the other eye besides.

As a result, Gene was seeing his foe much of the way through a red haze, and sometimes double. Through it all, he fought back, rocking Harry on occasion and catching him here and there with a shot downstairs. But on this night he was a man with a spade trying to heave back an avalanche.

As rounds passed, Doc started shaking the adrenaline into his hand so that his fighter could suck it in, as best he could, through that splattered beak. Several times the solution ran down Gene's throat into his stomach. At the end of twelve rounds, the fighter took, for the first time in his career, a few hits of the brandy mix, which joined badly with the adrenaline and blood going with it. In the last several minutes, nauseated and all but dead, he was still bent on hearing that last bell. To the amazement of all, including referee and former lightweight great Kid McPartland, he made it. Only afterward, on the stairs leading to his dressing room, did he collapse. It was two hours before he could be led out of the arena.

If Gene took a handicap into the contest, it might be added, so did Harry, who conceded to the champion not only size, but the sight in his right eye, which he had lost through years of ring warfare. But whatever difficulties each man brought along, the battle was one to be remembered. (As one index, it was deemed Fight of the Year by Nat Fleischer's fledgling publication *The Ring*.)

Bagley now wanted his man to lay off ring action for several months. And here again, Gene's tenacity, his refusal to say *die* in the face of fact, came to the fore. The very next day, he sought to reserve a rematch with the boxing commission. To an incredulous Doc, he said that he wanted it within the next few weeks. His 45 minutes inside that roped crucible, as Gene saw it, had dealt him not merely agony, but fistic insight. It had given him what he needed strategically to contend with the new champion. Harry, he now realized, worked best when he was able to take the initiative, getting off first and impressing the judges, at times, with punches that did not land square. Instead of fighting reactively as he had in New York, Gene would meet the rushes, with improved timing, head-on – he would wreck the Greb buzz-saw, as he put it, by throwing a hunk of iron into it.

It is unlikely that Bagley saw much that night other than his man getting a beating. But there was more to be seen by an attentive eye. Former featherweight great Abe Attell, who had watched the fight, and had even managed to secure extra bottles of the chloride for Gene's corner during the action, told Doc that he would be willing to buy Gene's contract. This fighter, said Abe, had in him the stuff of a coming heavyweight champion.

While Doc was not selling at the moment, he did not share this estimate, nor did he want Gene in with Harry again for the time being. The issue of an immediate rematch became a sticking point for the two men, whereupon Gene, minus Doc's approval, set out to prove his point. Removing himself to the estate of a friend in rural New Jersey, he took a brief respite, then launched forward in high gear. He worked to improve everything he had, seeking also to develop a left hook that would rival the right hand that had provided most of his knockouts.

Soon Gene would give Bagley five thousand dollars to part with his interest. He would join forces with Billy Gibson, who had taken lightweight immortal Benny Leonard to the top of his game. While not long on his command of boxing technique, Billy had a good nature and strong business acumen. Watching the ex-Marine endure 15 rounds with Greb, he had seen also, as had Abe Attell, Gene's unassailable heart.

Stern tests, each going the distance, came that summer against Fay Kaiser and hard-hitting Charlie Weinert. The latter one, a rough and foul-marked event staged in Newark, was officially a "no-decision" as was the norm in some states in that day, with Tunney getting the unofficial nod from ringside newsmen. But Gene, always acquiring something by his experience, improved on this in late November in a rematch at the Garden. As before, Weinert started head-first and rough. Gene, wary of being sucked again into that dogfight, bided his time. In the third round, things got a mite anxious when Weinert brought blood from his nose with a right hand wallop. Then, in the fourth, feinting Charlie wide open, Gene unloaded a left hook that sent him down, flat as a crepe, done for the night.

It may be that Tunney owed something to another master of ring science while getting ready for that second fight with Harry. During this time, as Donald Dewey notes in his recent biography of legendary trainer Ray Arcel, he had started dividing his energy essentially between two tasks. The first, which took a good part of his day, was to enter a New York gymnasium and slam a heavy bag, round upon round, fantasizing his revenge. The second was to phone or visit Gibson at his restaurant on 149th Street and Third Avenue, wanting to know what had been done to secure the rematch. Nearing the end of his rope with Gene, Billy asked Leonard to visit the gymnasium and give his fighter some attention.

Arcel, who learned much of his trade, early on, from Doc Bagley, would long recall the encounter. When Benny came into the gym, said Ray, a reverential quiet fell over most of it. On seeing Gene, Leonard walked over and offered a greeting.

The fighter, still punching, did not break his rhythm, even when telling Benny what he was going to do to Greb when again they met. To which the ring master replied, "How, [by] throwing your right hand? Where are you going to hit him with your right hand? On the chin? The only place you hit Harry Greb with a right is in the body … under the heart."

Leonard added that *the longer it took* to get that rematch, the better for Gene. Greb, as Arcel would say later, might have 20 or 25 fights in a year, and "fight or no fight, he went from woman to booze to woman." No man alive could keep that pace without paying for it, though Harry himself might have kept it for a stretch unequalled in the annals of the ring. In the meantime, every so often, Benny would come by the gym to reinforce his idea.

Three fights later, in February of 1923, Gene met Harry again. It was another see-saw donnybrook, each man wreaking his share of havoc, but this time Gene had more answers. Skilled already as a body puncher, and seizing upon advice he got from Benny, he met Harry with sharp blows that told in his favor.

Harry, catching fire, came back savagely to sweep the middle rounds. But in the late going he was unable to dominate Gene as he had the year prior. Now, his energy waning, threatened with disqualification at the end of the twelfth, he found himself on the receiving end of what he had dished out last time. In the 14th round, a right hand nearly floored him, and another right, squarely where Benny had told Gene to throw it, nearly cut Harry in half. In the 15th, Tunney was landing hard, and still whacking that body. At the end he was again the American light-heavyweight champion.

Fans and scribes, at the final bell, were divided on the outcome, with Harry's Pittsburgh contingent shaking the rafters in their man's favor. But on balance, said most, including an attending Nat Fleischer, Gene had landed the cleaner punches, rightly earning it in those last two frames.

Georges Carpentier

The next major stop for Gene was Georges Carpentier, a memorable figure who began his ring training in the French kick-boxing system of *savate* and soon entered into the ranks of conventional boxing, where his punching power made him much in demand.

Starting his career at the precocious age of 14 as a flyweight, the young hitter annexed the French welterweight title three years later in June of 1911. Four months after that he won the European title at the same weight. Game to no end, possessing a mule-kick of a right hand, Georges would win, early in 1913, the European light-heavyweight championship. Remarkably, he added to this the continental heavyweight title when he knocked out Bombardier Billy Wells in the fourth round of a slugfest that June.

Carpentier's career was interrupted when he signed up with the French Air Force during the great conflict. Awarded the War Cross and the Military Medal for his bravery, he returned to ring action and won again the European heavyweight title before traveling to the states to face Battling Levinsky for the light-heavyweight championship of the world. Georges won by a knockout in the fourth round.

Thinking big, playing upon the Frenchman's gallant record and Jack Dempsey's own raw image, Tex Rickard was able to bring more than 80,000 spectators to a specially constructed wooden amphitheater for a heavyweight title fight in Jersey City. Named (for a recent land owner) Boyle's Thirty Acres, it would be the site of boxing's first million dollar gross sales gate. Staged on July 2, 1921, the production had as its theme a war hero, France's renowned Orchid Man, pitted against a champion who, having remained stateside as his family's sole money earner, was still tinged with the label of *slacker* for his civilian status during that time.

The outcome was no surprise. Outweighed and outgunned, the French fighter fell in the fourth round, though not before he had staggered the champion with a right hand in the second. Now, three years afterward, Carpentier faced a rising Gene Tunney.

The rivalry of these two had actually begun during the war, after Gene won the AEF title on Georges' own native ground. When talk started of pitting them against each other, the Frenchman was called back to active duty. Each man had long counted the other as his fighting inferior, and now, following a prolonged squabble over money, the two camps came to terms.

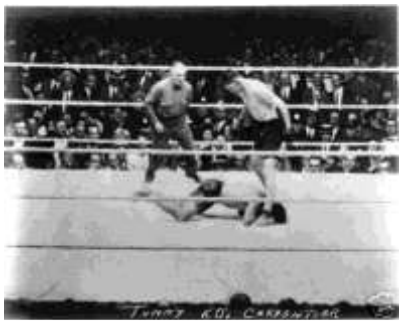


Image courtesy of BoxRec

At 30, Georges had climbed the ring steps more than a hundred times. Again, as against Dempsey, he was facing a younger and bigger man, and again he made a game stand. By Gene's own recollection, he himself was not in ideal shape that day. Straining to make the 175-pound limit, he fell prey also to a faulty scale in his camp, and as a result entered the ring over-drawn and several pounds lighter than necessary.

The fight was a spirited one, Carpentier getting in his licks before fading in the middle rounds. In the seventh he was down, and in the tenth, Gene all but mopped the canvas with him. Georges fell again in the 14th round, claiming a foul, but the referee was not buying it. (By the recollection of Nat Fleischer, it was a left hand under the heart, reminiscent of the one that had famously won a fight for Bob Fitzsimmons, years earlier, in an epic contest with Tunney's own idol James Corbett.) In the fifteenth, with the French fighter helpless and Gene himself unanxious to carry it further, the referee called a halt.

Tunney the Reader

The Domenic DeMarco Collection

Gene's penchant for literature never did set well with an American public that wanted club-wielders as its champions. He quickly sensed it, and his own resentment, as he would admit, often got the better of him. With an unimaginative reporter, he could get right sniffy.

The fuss over Gene and books would become front-page material a couple of years later when he was training for his first fight with Jack Dempsey. At the time he had a camp beside the pine-rimmed Lake Pleasant off a two-lane highway in the village of Speculator, New York. Sent to get a gander at this challenger was Brian Bell, on his first sports assignment for the Associated Press.

As Jay Tunney notes, this was a wonderful time to be covering an athlete – sporting interest had doubled, and doubled again, in the years since the Great War. Bobby Jones, Babe Ruth, Red Grange, and Dempsey, among others – whether on the links, the diamond, or the gridiron, and surely also in the ring, America could not get enough of its heroes. In London, as it would turn out, even revered playwright George Bernard Shaw was providing sports commentary, centering upon his personal favorite, which was boxing.

But on this day, the sporting novice Bell would admit, he felt as if he were going to an auction merely to survey livestock. Arriving late in the day, with workouts over, he stuck his notepad in his pocket and went off to the tiny "secret cabin" where he was advised to seek the object of his main interest. He knocked, and receiving no answer, he ventured a look inside, where he found an immaculately ordered room with cot, desk, typewriter, dresser, and bookshelves in neat alignment laden with cognitive challenge.

Getting back from a daily run to find his sanctuary invaded, Gene pulled open the door. Bell, a hefty outgoing sort, put him at ease by explaining his mission, and then expressed his amazement with the literature. What, he wondered, was Tunney reading at the moment? Tunney described his current involvement with Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, which featured also a preface by Bernard Shaw, whom Gene counted among his favorites.

Receiving serious comment upon the book and its themes, Bell saw that this upstart was no mere side of beef. The two men traded amiable stories of their lives and careers, and Bell went away quite taken with the newcomer – more taken, in fact, with his literacy and wry humor than with his prospects elsewhere. With good intentions, he produced a story on the young eccentric for newspapers around the country.

Initially this set well with Gene, who wanted to show the world that a man could be a fighter in the ring and a gentleman outside it. The problem was, it was hard for many writers to take this idea seriously, and once they were convinced, they found it hard to craft a positive image for such a man, or to enjoy the time they spent in his vicinity.

Tunney, found many a scribe to his disappointment, did not hang around with writers after they closed their books, jawing off-hand with them at a card table while downing beer. In the hours when he was not training, he was mining recondite literature or savoring Chopin. By contrast, noted the highly astute Paul Gallico, the Dempsey camps of recent years had been homely "cross-sections of vulgarity" where phonographs blared and sparmates tussled. The champion himself might play pinochle or join in the roughhousing, and "frowsy blondes" could figure into the mix before the night was done.

Years afterward, author-activist Studs Terkel would remember from his childhood the coming showdown. Dempsey, once overcoming his draft-dodging image, had become a hero for the ages. Whereupon, said Studs, "Along came this new guy, Tunney, who makes it clear he's an intellectual, or pretends

to be, and the writers took whacks at him – they HATED him, so we hated him." Everybody, said Studs, wanted Jack in this fight, except his older brother, himself an outcast academic.

Even established authors of the day could take Gene to task without knowing him. The criticism, at times, was mean-spirited in the extreme. Once, a bit later, when invited to give a novelty lecture at Yale University, he let on to his student audience that he had needed ten readings to grasp something that had been written by William Shakespeare. In a remarkably uncharitable passage, the supposedly affable Will Rogers ridiculed this statement, taking it as proof that the athlete was not as astute as many supposed.

"Is something wrong with Shakespeare," he asked coyly, "or with Gene?" If folks had to read the famous bard that many times, after all, to get his message, then "he is not the author he is cracked up to be." But if reading him once *would* suffice for most of them, he reasoned, "Tunney is not the high-brow that *he* is cracked up to be."

Surely this was an unfair take on the champion. It was also a wrong-minded comment on the activity of reading itself. For one thing, Gene was largely self-educated; thus his introduction to the great authors was made without the guidance a young reader often obtained in the high school curriculum. Moreover, some authors run deeper than others; to understand them takes not just literacy, but relevant life experience. Thus one may absorb, say, a Tolstoy or a Dickens differently at 21 than at 35. Some, like Shakespeare, are stylistically hard, and the task is not made easier by their now archaic language. A modern reader, however well equipped, comes at them from a world far removed from theirs. Gene realized this, perhaps better than did Will Rogers, even at a young age.

It is a testament to his honesty that the fighter was always conservative in his claims about what he read, and that he would not credit himself with having truly *read* a work until he knew it, to his own satisfaction, cover to cover. The wholly unliterary Harry Greb, when asked whether he believed that Gene actually read books, paid him a splendid compliment by saying that when Gene read something, he ended up knowing its content as well as did the one who wrote it! (As to *why* anybody would read a book, the redoubtable Windmill was less certain.) This capacity, Harry added, carried over to the ring: "I gave him a lesson in our first fight and he learned it so well that I was never able to hurt him or cut him up again."

In fact, Gene approached reading in much the way that he approached boxing. Fighting and literature, he estimated, "were allied arts, through the medium of training." Gene sometimes even read books *in order* to fight better – more than once he delved into a text on physiology to better gauge the worth of a punch by where it landed. When training for the AEF bouts, he would later remark, he had also employed, as a break from it all (he would drop this sort of thing, now and then, on a plodding scribe), "the reveries of *Hamlet* and the sighs of *Juliet*."

The Domenic DeMarco Collection

As to their ring rivalry, Gene and Harry would meet three more times, resuming hostilities to the hilt without losing respect for each other. Harry would always be sour about their fourth one, a ten-rounder in Cleveland, officially by the going state rules a "no decision," that had him feeling slighted by the men who covered it. (When one local writer, a personal friend of Harry's, headed his commentary with the admission that Gene had been "too much for our boy," Greb wrote him off, and the two never spoke again.)

But now, after their fifth fight, he would tell Gene to go after Dempsey, with whom he had worked years earlier after Jack had knocked out Willard. The champion, maintained Harry, could be bested by a savvy fighter – in fact, he had always felt that he himself could have outhustled Jack with the money on the table. Tunney, he now believed, would beat him hands-down.

Tommy Gibbons

The gatekeeper standing between Gene and Jack was Mike Gibbons' younger brother Tom, who at 175 was a size larger and a bigger hitter than his sibling. Like Michael, Tommy would never win a world title, despite being hailed as one of the finest ringmen of his time. He was also a puncher, something overshadowed by his wonderful keenness, which alone would have earned him a high place all-time in the division.

He hung in for all 15 rounds with Dempsey on July 4, 1923, in the outlying hamlet of Shelby, Montana, while guaranteed nothing for his trouble but training expense. Undeterred by the loss, and despite feeling his age after a ring trek that had been thick with toil, he pushed on, racking up wins aplenty.

"For several years," Gene would say, "Tom was a bane and a nuisance for me." Now and again it happens that one ringman will have, as it was then said, *the Indian Sign* on another. He will have, in other words, the upper hand against him in the ring, even when the latter is overall his equal or better. Often this imbalance owes to some special fear that he excites in that other fighter, whatever the reason. For example, the latter may have seen him prevail one-sidedly over a man who once gave him difficulty; thus now, even well after the fact, he cannot shake his own sense of inferiority.

This might have been such a case. When Tunney was returning from his labors in the far north in 1921, he attended a fight card at the Pioneer Athletic Club in New York City. The main event featured Tommy and journeyman Paul Sampson, whom Gene himself had battled for ten hard rounds. On this night Gibbons gave, by Gene's estimate, "the finest exhibition … I have ever seen in the ring." Sawing Sampson into mincemeat in a round and a half, Tommy looked invincible.

Had Gene and Tommy met at that time, Gibbons would probably have "owned" him from the first bell. In fact, Tom had wanted the fight for awhile. And looking back, Gene himself would be quite candid: The desire was not mutual. "I believed," he said, "that Tom would knock me out." He was thus relieved when Greb posted a win over Tom and put himself in line for that title fight at the Garden. (Little did the young champion know what he would be in for, in that maiden go with Harry.)

But now, as with Carpentier, Gene was getting his man at the right time. At 34, Tom was on the downside. Gene, in the meantime, had made himself ready. For all the while that he had dreaded meeting Gibbons, he had also planned how to defeat him. In geometric fashion, he had watched him, examining ring action stills, viewing motion picture footage – even enlisting the company of men who had worked with Tommy, seeking any clue as to his science or his psyche.

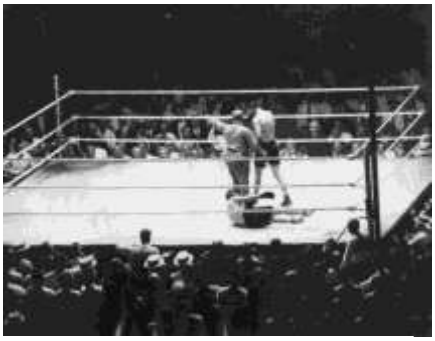


Image courtesy of BoxRec

At last, in running the film, he and Billy hit upon something. Tom, every so often, would feint a couple of times with his left, then rip his man hard with that same hand to the liver. One or two blows to that spot would get even a well-conditioned opponent to drop his hands a little, paving the way for a shot that could end it. But Tom had also, they saw, a habit of advancing his left foot an exact distance when committing himself to this feint and punch sequence.

Gene began to practice, in turn, a straight right hand for delivery the instant that he got that tip-off. As a result, Tommy was oft beaten in trades by a smidgen; as rounds passed, that beating took its toll. In the end, Gene did what Dempsey had not: An overhand right in the twelfth put Gibbons on the floor. He arose and tottered toward his corner, going down for good from a right hand seconds later.

Through all of this, Gene had a vision that transcended boxing. He set out not merely to excel at the game, but to employ it toward an end. "I was determined," he would say, "that the prizering should have no more effect on me, in point of morals and ideals, than an office might have, [or] a factory lathe, a college

classroom, or a farm." He wanted boxing not just for a fleeting spotlight or a fast-squandered payday, or (as one sees often of late) to *fete* a horde of dead-weight followers, but for what else it made possible.

In November of 1925 Gene received one of the true thrills of his life when he made the acquaintance of James J. Corbett. This meeting came after Tunney had gone the distance in a tough fight with heavyweight contender Johnny Risko in Cleveland. The former champion was in town doing work at a local theatre. Their meeting was electric: Corbett, Gene would say, had in him nothing of the thug, little indeed of what a prizefighter was commonly imagined to be – and all that an athlete could be, were he complete in his humanity.

In his early days Gentleman Jim had worked as a bank clerk; he had served also as a boxing instructor in an athletic club, and had attained note as an actor on the stage. He stood, said Gene, "for something that heartened me as a boxer." He was "a warrant of what I myself wanted to believe … that I could be a professional boxer and still be a civilized human being, normal, decently mannered." Corbett, who was nearing 60, sparred casually with Gene and regaled him afterward with stories of how he had shaped the game with his strategies – his bag drills, his hours of mind's eye shadow-boxing rehearsals, even choreographic diagrams he had sketched to help him contend with an opponent's advances.

Gene was not happy with the Risko fight. His hands again were hurting him, and he had to content himself with a twelve round "no decision" verdict even though news scribes had given him the better of it. But Corbett added to his education of the younger man some key words of encouragement:

"Son," he avowed, "if you'd had Dempsey in there tonight, you would have knocked him out."

The Fight in Philadelphia

Now, in 1926, Gene had arrived fully on the heavyweight scene. Yet many, at the time, wanted to see Dempsey defend the title against Harry Wills, a much-avoided 6'4 African-American heavyweight who was widely counted as the front-runner in the division.

Jack himself was willing to face Harry, and big and none too mobile sort of the kind he preferred as a foe. But promoter Tex Rickard, who controlled Dempsey, and had staged an incendiary fight in Reno between Jack Johnson and comebacking "White Hope" Jim Jeffries some 16 years earlier, wanted no part of another interracial contest on that scale. Gene, too, was willing to face Harry, if it would secure his chance with Dempsey. But it became a moot point when complications over the matchup ensued and Rickard chose Gene straight off as Jack's next opponent. Scheduled for ten rounds, it would be held in September in the nation's early capitol, The City of Brotherly Love.

Now, said Gene, the plan that had been conceived, that day on the Rhine River in a conversation with his Marine corporal, was coming to fruition. Years of sacrifice, of planning and design, "had brought me to the mountain-top from which I could see the promised land."

Still, he was no easy sell. Doubts about Gene's cognitive bent were matched by doubts as to his mettle. Getting the public, or the press, to buy into him, as a serious contender, was no small chore. If folks bought in, for that matter, they still did not like him. Studs Terkel's recollection from his youth described an emotional current that ran deep within society. A curious sympathy attaches, in our culture, to ring animals – to fighters who not only beat their opponents, but who ravage them. The public has great feeling for a slugger, be he even a drunk and a bully – even a felon – out of the ring, and often it will pull sentimentally for him against a more studied type.

Corbett, who saw much of himself in Tunney, had faced this situation back in 1892, when he went up against a physically aging John L. Sullivan, a tyrant of humongous appetites who for years had strode into gin mills offering to "lick any son of a bitch" on the premises. And years from now, in February of 1964, a

wonderfully glib young Cassius Clay, chock-full of sass, yet unblemished in his reputation, would encounter the same attitude when he went after heavyweight champion Sonny Liston.

Baleful, sullen, with prison time on his record and crime bosses for connections, Sonny could "stare down" an opponent like no man before him. Defensive about his own lack of letters, he could erupt at the approach of an interviewer, shattering all hope of a story. He was aggressive when seeing a woman that he wanted, and generally, went the word, he got what he wanted. In the ring, and in his day, he was a behemoth, 6'1 and 215 pounds of coal-dark menace with an 84" reach and hands that could encircle a medicine ball.

In 1962, after years spent laying waste to much of the division, Sonny had gotten a long due shot at champion Floyd Patterson. Ending it in sledgehammer fashion in the first round, he retained the crown against Floyd a year later in a virtual replay. By now, it was thought, no man alive could stay with him.

In an interview recorded shortly before the fight, and aired on news radio, the 22-year old Clay expressed his amazement at how America could favor Liston over an arrival like himself, by contrast fresh and utterly clean. When Clay won the fight, shutting down Liston after six rounds (and surviving an onset of near-blindness in the fifth, after a caustic lineament, which had made its way onto Sonny's gloves, had scalded his eyes), public resentment lingered.

Now, between these two eras, the same feeling held sway. Dempsey, away from the ring, was no Sullivan. But climbing through the ropes to face him, a man entered a lion's cage. As the fight approached, some of the most astute scribes on the scene voiced doubts as to Gene's chances. And just as surely they wanted to see the Jack put the rarefied newcomer in his place.

Tunney, said Paul Gallico, was eroding himself with his *cultural nonsense*. It was one thing that this oddball had read a book or two, and had purged himself of the *dese*, *dem*, and *dose* dialect of the urban many. Yet the man who would unseat the Manassa fighter, the writer insisted, "needs to be a fighter and nothing else but." Such a man would need a rage transcending reason; he would be willing to commit murder, if he could manage it, with his own two hands. "And I don't think that Master Tunney," concluded Paul, "who likes first editions and rare paintings and works of art, has it in him."

It is important, said James Corbett in his own memoir, for a "short-ender" (that is, a perceived underdog) to plant it in the head of his opponent that he nonetheless believes, against any and all odds, that he is going to win. In the weeks leading up, Gene missed no chance to proclaim his confidence as to the fight's outcome. He decided also to do something on the morning of the fight that would show the champion his peculiar nerve. Eschewing a winding 85-mile trip to the weigh-in on wet roads, he took off for Philadelphia in a dense fog from Stroudsburg in a small aircraft.

In this day, a year before Charles Lindbergh made his epic voyage across the Atlantic, such a flight was no small risk. Gene made the trip in a blood-red Curtiss Oriole, a three-seat biplane with flying stuntman Casey Jones perched in front of him.

In fact, this was one stunt that nearly backfired. On that cold grey flight, Gene got tossed like a salad, and the ordeal was extended when Casey lost his way over the Pocono Mountains. "When I got to Philadelphia," said Gene, "I was shaking and pale green." Instantly word spread that the challenger was sick with fright at the task that lay before him. Yet Gene, recovering quickly once he had his legs under him, now had one consolation: He knew that Jack would come at him with abandon from the gong.

And the reader had done his homework. "I studied Dempsey," recalled Gene, "at every opportunity," attending his fights, talking with men who had been in the ring with him, and poring through film footage. In spare hours, he and Gibson sat beside a clacking projector, seeking any odd move or tic that could provide an advantage. For awhile, there wasn't much to encourage them. By and large, what greeted the viewer was simply an unfazed chin-down wrecking machine bringing injury in each hand.

But no fighter is perfect. Jack's own hitting power, Gene surmised, had kept him from adding much to his ring technique since winning the title. Against Bill Brennan, while a victor, Jack had been uncreative. He had looked flawed, as well, in his fight with Argentine bull Luis Firpo, a truncated two-man riot that saw each fighter on the canvas and the champion knocked out of the ring before he prevailed in the second round.

Then, as with Gibbons, they hit upon something: Jack, in the heat of action, sometimes gave an ever-so-slight turn of his jaw when he started an offensive. It was a small thing, but all the more valuable for its subtlety. Given this foothold, Gene practiced by the hour, honing his right hand for the moment when that little side-tip yielded its announcement.

Gene saw, of course, that in the public eye, he had no business in a ring with Jack. Yet this, too, could work to his advantage: It might disarm Dempsey, who ordinarily did not underestimate an opponent. "Strictly a protective boxer without a punch," he would say in summarizing how he looked, from a distance, as the day approached – and one with fragile hands, to boot.

To what extent this image helped him, in the weeks preceding the fight, is open to estimate. But it did seem to put the champion in a relaxed state of mind when Chicago detective Mike Trant, a mouthy sort who was serving currently as Jack's bodyguard, came from Gene's camp one day to tell him that the fight was in the bag. The giddy young intellect, he announced, was "up there reading a book!" (Tunney would say in his memoirs that he could still remember words that rang out from Trant seconds after the opening bell: "*Come on, Jack, knock the big sissy into my lap!*" He yelled the words, said Gene, not knowing he had already made the outcome less likely by handing that blithe report to his employer.)

This widespread attitude toward Tunney had one more expression in his own dressing room when referee Tommy Reilly, accompanied by the chair of the state boxing commission, paid Gene a last-minute visit to brief him on the rules in effect. Rabbit punching (behind the head) and blows to the kidneys, said Reilly, would be illegal. Gene, knowing that Jack was not careful, in the heat of war, where his blows landed, asked how far such tactics might go before a man got disqualified.

Reilly, getting severe in his tone, reminded him that when he stepped through those ring ropes it would be "no pink tea" but rather "a fight for the heavyweight championship of the world."

His own voice rising, Tunney replied that he and Jack could climb into that ring bare-handed, so long as he knew where he stood on the governing policies.

Said the ref, "Listen, I want you to understand that I don't want squawks from the loser when this fight is over."

"Go over and tell that to Dempsey," retorted the challenger. "He will be far more interested in what the loser has to say than I."

Image courtesy of BoxRec

For all the received wisdom regarding this fight, Gene knew that he needed more than caution to win it. In much the way that young Cassius, years later, would sail into a bewildered Liston in the closing minute of their first round, Gene asserted himself early. In the opening frame, luring Jack with what seemed like a sudden loss of confidence, he did what Carpentier had done, planting a right hand on Dempsey's face that rocked him to his soles.

Jack, by God, had a fight on his hands. Rounds passed. A pervading autumn mist turned to rain, first in a drizzle and then, at times, in a driving hail. But even as water soaked the canvas and hampered each man's footing, Tunney kept the upper hand. Trained to the minute, executing moves like a surgeon, he had Jack at a

loss in nearly every round. Several times, the champion started fast, then faded within a minute. The challenger, at the end of ten, had won by a near shutout.

Gene and Polly

Image courtesy of BoxRec

During social engagements, prior to this fight, Gene had several times run into a gregarious young woman named Katherine "Cotton" Lauder. Connected as she was, by her grandfather George Lauder to the vast Carnegie steel empire centered in Pittsburgh, Cot had all the elegance that befitted her station. By now, she and her husband thought enough of Gene to suggest that he make the acquaintance of her younger sister Mary Josephine, whom everyone knew as Polly.

Bright and beautiful, yet deeply withdrawn, Polly was nearing 19 years of age with scarcely an encounter with the opposite sex in her history. Since losing her father at eight, she had taken to books as her refuge. On receiving Cot's proposal, she consented to meet Gene – but with the strict assurance that this would be a *dinner*, not an out-and-out *date*.

On that fateful evening, when Gene entered the residence, she soon heard, to her surprise, their eminent guest carrying on in down-home fashion with Dowie, a long-time family attendant who had protectively shared an apartment with Polly when she attended school in New York City. But as she now laid eyes on the athlete, who was a decade her senior, her reaction was electric. What she noticed first, peering out apprehensively through a cracked door, was his hair, showing its wave even when neatly trimmed, and sporting flecks of natural red beneath the ceiling light – flecks, as Jay Tunney would describe it, "which seemed to dance like a burnished halo."

Inhaling deeply, summoning her nerve, Polly walked out to greet Gene and beheld what she would remember for the rest of her life. "His eyes!" she would say. "His luminous, brilliant, beautiful blue eyes." Scarcely able to manage conversation for the remainder of the evening, or to recall afterward much of what got said, she would not forget "those piercing blue eyes."

Scarcely a work has been penned on this fighter that does not make reference to his looks. When an athlete has this gift, he is apt to be called *movie-star* handsome, but in Tunney's case, it is an understatement. Hollywood types – particularly, it seems, in recent years – are rarely as vibrant, or as incisive, as was Gene.

"Tunney is a remarkable man," announced Sir John Lavery after persuading Gene to sit for an oil portrait. "I saw a man of perfect physique, with a face so sensitive that I found it hard to realize that he was the champion heavyweight of the world." As a subject for a painter, he was wonderful, and for a sculptor, said the artist, he would be ideal: "I thought that here indeed was a favorite of the gods."

Each man, it has been said, is down deep either Plato or Aristotle. Each, in other words, finds reality essentially in outward sensory terms, as did Aristotle, or in otherworldly fashion, as did his beloved teacher. Some rare types seem to have a foot planted strong in each world. While Gene was voracious in his exploration of what lay around him, he never lost the inward attunement that he owed to his mother.

As for him and Polly, it would be no whirlwind courtship. During his training, and even away from it, Gene had long resisted efforts to drag him into the widespread sexual freedom that marked (long prior to the sunlit cry of "free love" in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district) this roaring decade. As a result, these two were likely each as pure, as the great bard of Avon himself had once put it, *as driven snow* on the night that they met, and throughout their acquaintance. But from that night, and over more than a year of contact as chance allowed it, they were taken with each other.

This rapport gained intensity, in time, in clandestine meetings at the apartment of mutual friend Helen Ufford. In soulful trysts (chaperoned by Helen herself, out of respect for Polly's mother), Gene and Polly held communion with the likes of Byron, Shelley, and Wordsworth, pouring out to each other, in the process, their deepest longings – and falling head over heels in love.

The decisive moment came when Gene delivered the address for his friend Professor William Phelps at Yale. Polly, heir to cultured wealth from her earliest days, feared that her beau would be eaten alive by the element that figured to lurk in this venue. But Gene's talk, brief and informal, yet strong and sanguine with his own moral spirit, was a resounding success.

The real climax, however, was yet to come. After staying the night with Phelps, he caught the New York bound train that Polly would be riding. It was April 21st, and Polly's 21st birthday. Ecstatic over what had happened at Yale, they retreated to the rear of the car, where they proceeded to carry on the whole way home. When the train made its last stop, they were engaged to be Mr. and Mrs. James Joseph Tunney.

The Long Count

In the meantime, public reservation toward Tunney would continue. And Dempsey, who had won over the public during the years of his title reign, was now adored as perhaps no other man in the sporting world.

Entering his hotel room, it was alleged, Jack had drawn a gasp from his wife, the stunning actress Estelle Taylor, by his bashed and purpled appearance.

"*Ginsburg*," said Estelle, employing her pet name (in addition to English-Irish and Choctaw-Cherokee blood, it was said, Jack had in his lineage a *kosher* streak) for her bruised mate, "what happened?"

"Honey," said the fighter, "*I forgot to duck*."

Such did the line resonate, once it was loosed, that it not only endeared the beaten fighter to the nation, but was revived to describe mishaps hither and yon for years to come. (Long after its origin had faded from mainstream awareness, in fact, it would be offered up gamely by President Ronald Reagan, felled by a bullet in an attempt on his life by a young psychotic more than half a century later.)

The flip-side of this Dempsey adoration was a swelling resentment of the man who had bested him. Once, not long after the fight in Philadelphia, the new champion made an appearance with Dempsey at Madison Square Garden. On this occasion Gene was to receive ceremonially the belt he had just won. When Jack was introduced, fans in attendance were ecstatic, roaring their admiration for a man who was now prize ring royalty. Then, as Gene took that canvas stage, a telling thing happened. For just after this outpouring for the fallen hero, there came a murmur that rose and erupted, like a blast of hot tar, into boos and catcalls.

It took a moment for this reaction to fully register with the new crown holder. But when it did, he was sickened. For months to come he was bitter, and more aloof, as a result, than he had been with the dime-a-dozen notepad types who tried to engage him. From now on, he decided, he would receive fully half the gate receipts ("No more *free boos*," as he dryly put it) if he made even a guest appearance in the ring. He stopped reading the sports columns and insisted upon solitude when he did his roadwork. He issued statements rather than soil his hands with interactive press conferences.

Of course, it was a no-win situation. The public, never given to sympathy with Gene, and seeing him now through a lens yet more sternly refractive, viewed him all the worse. And in the meantime, another challenge loomed. Dempsey, who did not take well to being an ex-champion, had earned a rematch in an elimination fight with his come-from-behind knockout of contender Jack Sharkey. With sights set on the man who had conquered him, he was training with ferocity. The rematch came at Soldier's Field in Chicago the following year.

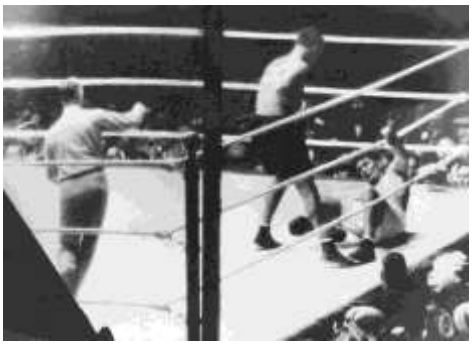
You did not make a mistake with this man from Colorado. Around mid-way in their first fight, Gene had caught Jack's left hand, the same blow that had wrecked men like Fred Fulton and Jess Willard, on his throat. While Jack enjoyed few moments of success in Philadelphia, that one would have Gene coughing blood for days, and it would leave him with a slight rasp in his voice ever after.

Yet still, the second bout seemed to begin where the first had left off – Tunney moving, jabbing, choosing his angles and one-upping Jack in neat fashion.

Then, in the seventh round, hell broke loose. Dempsey, on the attack, got through with a ringing overhand right. Gene wobbled. His retreat cut short by the ring ropes, he got hit with left and right again, and then once more, this time with Jack's Sunday best, a head-wrenching left hand that started him into the one descent he would ever experience in a professional ring.

As the champion was falling, Dempsey tried to follow up – tried, as he would say, to hit Gene with every shot he had ached to land for *lo*, these seventeen rounds. But his target, like some fantasy prize that passes through the hands in emergence from a dream, was fading out of reach.

Gene hit the canvas momentarily black to the world.



The Domenic DeMarco Collection

And now, in this instant, the plot thickened. For in this contest, as each man had been reminded at ring center, the fighter standing had to retreat to a neutral ring corner when a knockdown occurred. Yet Jack, like a crazed cat, couldn't take his seething black eyes off his prey – and he couldn't bring himself to comply with referee Dave Barry's order to head over there.

"Here I stay," he growled, mad for the kill.

As a result, the count was delayed. Gene, regaining his senses, took one knee and listened carefully to the toll. After some 13 or 14 seconds in all, as it would later be figured, he rose. He then made good use of his feet, surviving this brush with catastrophe.

But it was not a wholesale retreat. Before the round ended, he rocked the challenger a couple of times, and met him once also with a body shot – a right hand under the heart that was as wicked, said Dempsey later, as any punch he had ever taken. In the next round he nailed Jack, for good measure, with a counter right hand to the jaw that had him momentarily on one knee. He finished the fight, much as he had in Philadelphia, well ahead on the cards.

The Domenic DeMarco Collection

Now came the controversy. Tunney, by the letter of the law, was the rightful winner. But Jack, said some, had been cheated.

How long had Gene been on the floor? Could he have gotten up had the count not been delayed? Judging from the footage, he would have beaten the count. The more difficult question is whether he could have survived the round without those extra seconds to clear his head. In good-natured fashion, the two great fighters would rehash this event time and again in years to come:

"To this day," Gene would recall, "in any barroom you can work up a wrangle on the subject." Gene himself thought that he would have made out well no matter how Barry had handled it. In looking back he expressed surprise that he was caught unseeing, in the first place, with that madcap "left swing" of Dempsey's. Never one to miss, in his retelling, a point that would count in his favor, the winner put it down to a slight abrasion of his right eye, received days before, in the training camp.

His rival, not to be outdone, maintained in a published response that the big blow was no accident. In that seventh round, Dempsey explained, "I tore into him and, forcing him to the ropes, I let loose that left hook he didn't see." Even if Gene had been gifted with *three* good eyes, said Jack, he would have been in no position to deal with it! Citing the recollection of the timekeeper, he said further that Gene might have been on that canvas some 17 seconds.

In the aftermath, promoter Tex Rickard was champing iron for a third go, which he believed would gross more than three million dollars. Gene, too, wanted the fight, but Dempsey chose to say farewell. He cited as his chief reason the likelihood of damage to his eyes, should he continue fighting, after years of head-first combat. Maybe he also believed that he had given it, by now, his best effort.

Perhaps, too, it was a wise choice. For this second outcome in a way was ideal: The "long count" would leave each man forever with some claim to mastery over the other. "I think," Jack would say aptly, "Tunney and I are both extremely lucky; for we're cashing in yet on that fight, which, it begins to appear, will continue to be 'fought' … as long as there are fight fans to air their opinions."

George Bernard Shaw

There loomed an uneasy meeting. Gene, in his youth, had come onto the works of the great Bernard Shaw by reading his early novel *Cashel Byron's Profession*. It is the story of a man, born to ground-level British society, who discovers a talent for prizefighting. Young Cashel, while he is out of place in refined settings, finds that he exceeds the men there nonetheless in both animal prowess and aptitude. The climactic part of the drama concerns his affection for a cultured young woman.

Image courtesy of J.J. Johnston

Years later, when Gene was on top of the fistic world, Hollywood mavens Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky approached him about the possibility of doing a film version of the story – with Gene himself in the lead role. And here came a surprise: Sparing nothing in his assessment, Gene replied that the book, while displaying Shaw's literary knack, fell short on what it would need as a motion picture. Moreover, he ventured, the tale was shallow, its characters were over-sentimentalized – and Cashel himself, when it came down to it, was something of a bore!

Before long, this "take" on the story was relayed to the great author. Hearing of it, Gene braced himself for what he imagined would be "a scathing Shavian blast" that would flay alive a mere prizefighter with his temerity.

In response, however, and to Gene's amazement, Shaw expressed admiration. "Did Tunney actually say those things?" he asked. "If he did, the young man must have some literary taste. I'd like to meet him."

What Tunney did not know at the time was that Shaw's interest in boxing was longstanding, and that he had been following Gene's own exploits for awhile. On seeing footage of the Carpentier fight, he would tell Gene later, he had been sold on him – first and foremost for his willingness to take the French fighter's right hand, time and again, and come back fighting. (He and Gene would now hash this over at length, the fighter insisting that often he was "riding" with these shots in much the way of Shaw's own counterpunching hero!)

As Jay Tunney shows at length, this friendship was a voyage in mutual discovery. Shaw, like Bertrand Russell, was a profound humanist with little use for the going mass-hypnotic brand of religious faith. In Tunney he found not merely a diversion, but a kindred soul of razor-fine discernment. And each man, in his way, was profoundly spiritual, Tunney being reared (however ruggedly) in an Irish Catholic home and Shaw fitting the

description, in one of his own works, of a man who had not *too little* soul for the church, but *too much*. Each, by the same token, was appreciative of the depth and decency of the other.

Like Shaw, Gene was appalled at the failure of governments, at home and abroad, to speak to inequities that eroded the states over which they presided; he was appalled no less at the longstanding failures of the Church. Gene, in fact, had owed to the older man a debt of insight well before they ever met. Shaw's play *Saint Joan*, which tells the story of the 15th century peasant girl who led a French army to victories in the Hundred Years' War, had shaken him in its force and depth, prying him loose from the relatively easy faith he had once enjoyed. Like his scholarly friend, he was unwilling to hide from a difficult truth: He refused to take intellectual refuge, by default, in a religious credo or a political institution. He saw that a church, like a government, can wax and wane in its condition, can be healthy or unhealthy in the degree that mortal hands may shape it. While still a believer, he realized that a church, in the end, is but one more thing toward which the soul must take its stand.

Gene and Bernard Shaw would be, to each other, the best friend either ever had. Gene believed that he knew Shaw through his writing better than he knew any other author he had read. He also understood something of this man, he maintained, that the world at large did not. For the world, on the one hand, knew Shaw for his trenchant insight and encyclopedic knowledge; Gene knew him for his profound kindness. The fighter, by the same token, was an embodiment – too good, Shaw sometimes thought, to be true – of the lucidity and moral courage that he sought to convey in his best characters.

The two men became true kin early in their acquaintance when they shared a crisis in the Brioni Islands, in the northern Adriatic Sea, during the extended honeymoon of Gene and Polly.

It began when Polly took ill, perhaps initially as a result of food poisoning. While at first it seemed like little, she gradually became worse, fever and dysentery taking their toll and bringing her at last to death's door, with no one in the vicinity, including the one resident doctor, able to help her.

At the very depth of his despair Gene rushed down the way to George and Charlotte, pouring out his heart in a weeping rage. Shaw now shared with the young husband the darkest night of his life, when he was faced with the unspeakable loss of this angel, the Juliet and soul-mate who had made his spirit whole.

The two men walked off and came upon St. Rocco's Chapel, a diminutive stone structure dating back to 1504 now scarcely in use. Shaw proposed that they enter.

Lighting candles, they sat, Gene crossing himself in the manner of his upbringing.

"I have always believed," he said to his trusted confidant, "in the power of prayer."

"Then," said Shaw, "you must pray."

Shortly after, Gene was back with Polly, who regained consciousness briefly the next day.

Unbeknownst to any of them, at that moment, two Berlin physicians, one of them the eminent A. W. Meyer, were arriving on the island in what was veritably an eleventh hour. Meyer, one of the most regarded doctors in Germany, furthermore specialized in cases involving the appendix, which was the source of young Mrs. Tunney's trouble. With Polly laid out, in desperate haste, on boiled sheets covering the kitchen table, he managed to drain a gangrenous abscess that had developed from a prior condition plaguing that organ. While not cured, she was removed from death's gate. The worst was over. In time she would regain her health. (Born in 1907, Polly would live to be nearly 101 years of age.)

Indeed there was a Shaw that few of his critics understood. No run-of-the-mill atheist, he was more spiritual in his constitution, and more profoundly acquainted with the Christian faith, than he ever seemed in the eyes of society. Like Gene, he would feel that this communion with his young friend, and Polly's rescue at the hands of Meyer, did involve something miraculous. He would remember it all his remaining days, during

which the two men maintained a spiritual bond. (And should justice ever prevail, the fighter once remarked, his free-thinking mentor will one day find *himself* canonized, if only for his preface to that disturbing play!)

Hanging it Up: An Epic Career Finished

On July 26, 1928, Tunney gave his last performance in the ring. Among several challengers, he chose a durable New Zealander named Tom Heeney. The Hard Rock from Down Under, as he was called, while not long on nuance, had a jawbone of granite and a heart to match. In a worthy career, he had not been stopped.

The streak came to an end, as did Heeney's status as a contender, when he and Gene met that night in the Bronx. It was perhaps Gene's greatest exhibition, bearing in mind that Heeney did not present the challenge of a Greb or a Dempsey. By his own estimate the champion entered the ring, at 31, in the best shape of his life, and in a remarkable calm, a state that he attributed in part to the salubrious effect of Henry David Thoreau, whose works he had recently discovered.

Tex Rickard, who promoted the match, had hoped to match Gene instead with a more dynamic sort, such as Jack Sharkey. But Sharkey was unpredictable – after defeating Harry Wills, for example, he had lost not only to Dempsey, but to Gene's old foe Johnny Risko, which nixed his appeal. While harboring his doubts, Tex made the fight with Heeney.

The doubts were well founded: The gate had Tex at a loss. Further, the fight was a virtual one-man symphony as Tunney let fly, beating his challenger like a rented drum. In today's ring, it might have been over within a few rounds, but these were tough times, and a referee was not apt to call it with each man still up.

In the eighth, stunned and bloodied, Heeney was momentarily unable to see, causing Gene to cease his attack in hope that the referee would intervene. Then the beaten man rallied again, winning the admiration of a crowd for a valiant effort. At last, in the tenth, a sustained assault to body and head had him helpless, and a left hook to the head felled him as the bell sounded.

Incredibly – so, at least, by any modern gauge – Heeney's seconds sent him out for the eleventh round, where he plodded forward, a stout Quixote into a withering mill, whereupon the referee did his job.

Image courtesy of BoxRec

Now at the height of his strength, Gene could have continued for another year or two without a serious challenge. But the ring had served its purpose. As he would say to friends, shortly afterward, dismissing any thought of another contest inside the ropes, "That's *that*."

And he meant it. The year prior, after the Dempsey rematch, he and Rickard had tallied his share of the proceeds at more than $990,000. Writing out a check to make up the difference, he received in turn from Tex a payment – incredible by the day's standards – of a cool (and tax free) million dollars. Now, with Polly at his side, and adventures waiting, he had within his joyful grasp what boxing had helped to make possible.

Tunney's story hardly ends here – he would go on to repeated successes, raising a family, heading corporations, and re-enlisting in the military during the Second World War. Entering the Navy to provide physical training to train student pilots, he was named athletic director of the Naval Air Training Program. Later appointed Director of the Physical Fitness Program for the whole service branch, he was an inspiration throughout his tour of duty. In time, his son John would serve six years as a U. S. senator from California. Gene would live until 1978 when he passed at 81. He was survived by his friend Jack Dempsey, who endured, albeit two years older, until 1983.

Among the Greats, in Body and Soul

Almost everyone, it seems, who saw Gene close-up had good things to say of him. As to what he could do in the ring, there is virtual consensus. Fleischer, cited earlier, at press row for some of Gene's biggest fights, would praise him as being the best conditioned of all the heavyweight champions; he would also rank him (as of the late 1960s) no less than eighth all-time in that class. Charley Rose put him at number six.

In issuing his ratings, Nat did not dual-list men who had fought major bouts in more than one division. If he had, he would have ranked Gene at 175 appreciably higher. Nor is this regard for Tunney confined to the old guard. In two noteworthy Cyber Boxing articles on the fighter, ring historian Mike Casey sings the fighter's praises, and cites others who do the same.

Boxing analyst Mike Silver, says Casey, did not take long to decide, when asked, how Gene would have fared with the appreciably bigger Larry Holmes. In a thought-provoking discussion entitled ***The Arc of Boxing***, Silver expresses his deep admiration of fighters in Gene's era and extending into the mid-20th century. It was a time, believes Silver, when hunger, hardship, and mental toughness produced stern and active fighting stock – a time furthermore when trainers imparted to their pupils boxing instruction and life wisdom in greater depth than has been the case since. The result was a Golden Age of roughly three decades that produced, on balance, a ring excellence surpassing both what had preceded it and what would follow. Gene, maintained Silver, would be too smart even for Larry, who is surely one of the elite heavyweights of recent times.

Contemporary fight historian Michael Hunnicutt regards Tunney as being, along with Jack Dempsey and Joe Louis, one of the three best heavyweights in ring history. The venerable Ray Arcel, as noted earlier, when working with Benny Leonard, saw Gene early on, in a career would eventually span six decades. (This longevity would owe, in part, to his decision, at the age of 71, to oversee the training of an explosive young lightweight out of Panama, early in the 1970s, named Roberto Duran.) Over those many years, Ray was involved with champions in every weight division, and he never ceased to express his regard for the Irishman's mental strength and fighting stamina.

Arcel's contemporary Whitey Bimstein believed that when all was said and done, Gene would have found a way to prevail, man to man, against every heavyweight champion from John L. Sullivan to Rocky Marciano. Contemporary historian Tracy Callis has Gene sixth as a heavyweight and first all-time at 175. In the estimate of Herb Goldman, Tunney was likewise the best light-heavyweight who ever lived.

Gene's high place in the thinking of experts like these is all the more impressive when taking into account that he was never a big athlete, even by the standards of the 1920s. For his second fight with Dempsey, to cite one benchmark, he came in just under 190 – scarcely a full-fledged cruiserweight in the modern arena. (Jack himself, in fact, rarely scaled more.)

Yet those who knew the man best reserve their highest praise for his character. Gene loved books, and he loved ideas. Moreover, he did not merely read books, he lived them. It was this trait that Yale deacon William Lyon Phelps, who first became acquainted with the fighter on a golf course, wanted to impart to his students when he invited Gene to do that guest lecture.

In time, the fighter would be not merely a reader, but a writer, composing two memoirs that detailed both his ring adventures and his outlook on life. When he did his second stint in the military during the Second World War, Gene bestowed lessons for life upon recruits, and offered candid instruction not only to personnel, but to a reading public on the home front. In an article entitled "The Shield of Continence" he stressed the need for discipline among young sailors and GIs who might fall prey to venereal disease that was now rampant within the ranks. Taking a stance that brooked no compromise, he advocated plain abstinence as a defense against personal loss, and against damage to the greater cause, for young recruits who might be swayed by their peers to seek out prostitutes in their free time.

And again, like every man, Tunney had his dissenters. To many a scribe, he seemed like a verbal show-off. Arcel, himself a long-burning light in a much-shaded industry, did not find him to be personally likeable, however much he admired him otherwise. He believed, for example, that the fighter could be austere in his treatment of friends who were down on their luck, and who were less fortunately situated than he, in money and in marriage. (Ray felt also that Gene's camp, prior to the first fight with Dempsey, had played upon lingering "draft" scandal regarding Jack even when they knew better.)

Some naysayers, too, may see in Gene's essay on continence a lofty condemnation of men whose impulses can, at times, all but overpower them. But his sympathy with such men, his understanding of their pressures and traumas, is evident in his discussion, as are his convictions, however little fashion they may have in today's moral arena. What, he asks, "does the average brothel patron *get* that is one-thousandth … as precious as [what] he *destroys*?" For in this effort to find outlet, and the momentary sense of being loved, he gains only the embrace of a "professional" that is a hazard to his health and "a shameful desecration of ideal love." Such effort will give him nothing of lasting worth; indeed it may endanger "the structure of mutual affection and shared happiness that the sex relationship builds for its faithful celebrants."

"Anyone," wrote Paul Gallico, swallowing whole his earlier Tunney skepticism, "checking his rise from humble beginning to wealth and fame would find a man of duty, self-confidence, initiative, burning ambition, indomitable courage and complete and utter fearlessness." Instead, he confessed, he and others had hated Gene for "committing the sin of beating Jack Dempsey."

Said Jim Murray, "He was unloved, underrated, shunned by his own people, rejected by history. Still, he was the best advertisement his sport ever had. He could outbox, outthink, outspeed any fighter of his day. His courage was incontestable … He was like no Irishman you ever saw, but he was the greatest Irish athlete who ever lived." Perhaps, when all was said and done, Gene Tunney had too much in him to be fathomed by a public that wanted easier material. As remarked one editorialist in the *Washington Star* after his passing, "there was never any real understanding of this man, who was too gifted, too fast and driven, to stay where people wanted him."

In a guest epilogue to Nat Fleischer's biography of Tunney, renowned athlete and trainer William Muldoon, who came of age in the nineteenth century and flourished well into the twentieth, extolled the fighter for his sporting excellence and his personal impact on the game. While paying due respect to the heroes of his youth, who had reigned in contests on the London Prize Ring turf, Muldoon noted also the undeniable improvements in the sport in the years since. In Gene he saw "a striking exemplar of high boxing skill, fine character, and appeal to the best type of boxing devotees." Here, he said, was a man who had his ideals before he became celebrated in the ring, and who hung onto them after. He might not have been, as Muldoon put it, a *hand-shaker*, seeking superficially after the favors of the press, but he was wholly himself in every situation, and his unpublicized acts of charity were more numerous than anyone outside his close circle imagined. As to boxing, Gene not only excelled at the sport, he uplifted it.

The Postulate of Freedom

In offering my own humble estimate in these pages I do not mean to say that Tunney was perfect, or that he was what every man needs to be. Not every episode in his long life belonged in a storybook (to cite one example, his daughter Joan would be institutionalized, in 1970, after she killed her husband). Nor is every man cut out to be a champion athlete, any more than he is destined to be tall and lithe, with piercing blue eyes, and to woo a pristine Carnegie heiress. Human excellence takes shape, in every case, according to the occasion that it is given. Yet still I cite him as a concrete instance of what one man did achieve, in courageous and intelligent fashion, in a given historical setting.

Myriad books, it is worth note, have rolled from the press in the past century purporting to help consumers live life to their full potential. While these discussions evolve, over time, with culture and

conceptual landscape, the best ones reiterate truths inherent in the human condition. Some, by the same token, enjoy phenomenal success in sales. And still, it seems, their potency – their capacity to effect real change in the lives of their readers – has its limit. Perhaps the reason is that such change requires of a reader not mere passive intake of ideas, but sustained and concrete acts of will thereafter.

Gene entitled his first memoir *A Man Must Fight*. While the book is devoted centrally to his ring career, the fight that concerned him most in life was never one that he had in the squared circle, but the battle that is waged, or should be, by a man each day against his own lesser nature. He was fond of a quote from Shakespeare's *Richard II* – "I have wasted time, and now doth time waste me." A meaningful life, he believed, requires the moral embrace of our own basic freedom of will.

Here, it might be added, yawns open a chasm of a question that reaches back to Athens. While it does not crop up often in fight talk, it may warrant at this point a nod of recognition: *Are we steered finally, in our life courses, by the blind forces of nature, or do we have it within us to rise above them?*

Some men imagine that they are helpless in the face of life's demands. Some, I have noticed, even take comfort in the idea: Now and again, for example, one hears a passive failure say that he might do otherwise than he does – but *alas*, he is simply not strong, or decent, or disciplined enough to manage it.

Some suppose, too, that this fatalism accords with science, which swallows up, as they imagine, all vestige of human spontaneity. Yet strong currents of thought in the past century, witness both to its progress and to its mass horrors, affirm instead a deep human liberty. Life, insists philosopher and dramatist Jean-Paul Sartre, is a continual process of self-forging. A man may get, by luck of the draw, a frail constitution – he cannot be dealt a cowardly one. No situation, maintains Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who was witness to the grim realities of World War II era concentration camps, can deprive us of our primal right to say *yes* or *no* to what confronts us.

Gene Tunney's Profession

Gene himself, of course, never pretended to resolve a question of this magnitude. Yet he also knew that really big questions – ones that involve such things as God, and self, and destiny, and obligation – are not merely for abstract types who bide their time in hallowed halls. They are tied, like it or not, to our life conduct: With each day's effort we declare our allegiance, at a practical level, to one cosmic outlook or another.

Perhaps in the end we cannot know their answers, but can only decide which answers echo our own deepest instincts. When all is said and done, said America's quintessential thinker William James, and whether we can prove it or not, *this life feels like a genuine fight* – as if there were something "really wild in the universe" that we ourselves are called upon, here and now, to actively redeem.

If herein we fall down, if we concede, believed this adventuring Harvard sage, it is our own doing. So, I think, believed the man who twice traded punches with Jack Dempsey. Often, he maintained, we are limited by ourselves and not our circumstances: We do not *lack* opportunities so much as we willfully *miss* them.

As noted earlier, this self-educated native of the old Village believed, from his youth, that he could bring about virtually any worthwhile end when he set his mind to it: "Anything," he sensed, "everything, was possible ... I felt that nothing, absolutely *nothing*, could ever stop me."

And nothing ever did. What the young ghetto Irishman professed, whether in a training camp or in an Ivy League auditorium, he believed. His life bore testament to it. A fitting last comment upon Tunney might be found in the words of Professor Phelps, in whose class the heavyweight champion spoke that spring afternoon in 1928 on the works of William Shakespeare. In fond remembrance a couple of years afterward, Phelps called attention, most of all, to the fighter's profound good nature.

"Tunney", he noted, "has been aided by an extreme sensitiveness to beauty." In this facet Gene is a revival of those ancients, and their descendants, who see in beauty something real and absolute – something that does not merely please the beholder's eye, but enlightens it. A novel, a poem, a *concerto*, gave him rest from his regimen without dissipating his energy or fraying his nerves. But more than this, it elevated him. In the works of men like Shakespeare, Chopin, John Keats, and his good friend Thornton Wilder, this athlete found insight into truth. What he absorbed, he enacted.

In Tunney, said this scholar, he was reminded of the difference between crass *conceit* and healthy *confidence*. Conceit, on the one hand, is a result of illicit, egocentric thinking; confidence is the fruit that is born instead of painstaking dedication to the task at hand.

"What I like best in him," said Phelps, "is his *genuineness*." Tunney was himself, learning from others while imitating no one. He learned, too, at every chance, yet never expressed so much as an opinion of a piece of literature until he had wrung from it, by his own severe measure, all that it contained.

"Moreover," Phelps added, "he is not only sincere and thoughtful, he has a warm heart."

Less flattering opinion of Tunney, it strikes me, has at times issued from envy over the gifts that life bestowed upon him. Rote newshounds, for example, who found him to be smug or condescending while trying to use him as a means to their end, likely resented his own natural acuity. Those who raised their eyebrows at his marriage to a beautiful child of the Lauder family, by the same token, may have harbored (what man could not?) a deep wish for the same prize.

If indeed they found it inappropriate that one man, in a world of great material want, should himself have so much, I say in turn: Maybe fortune did, in the fullness of time, bestow upon this one a fine harvest. But rarely in my own life have I seen a recipient more worthy. What gifts he had, he honed. What hardships, he endured. What difficulties, without flinching or fail he surmounted.

And such a man, as his Ivy League comrade observes, will not rest content solely with this bestowal, no matter how great it may be:

Said Phelps of Gene Tunney, "He values ideas more than things, and will not remain satisfied unless he feels he has done some good in the world."

* * *

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