

# The Ghost of Les Darcy

By Daniel Attias

*I scan the graves of the many forgotten until I see one that towers above the rest. Here lies the body of a heartbroken man, James Leslie Darcy...*



It's a grey and overcast winter's day in the middle of July at the East Maitland cemetery; the wind rustles the leaves from the towering gum trees that seem to guard the final resting place of the protagonist of one of boxing's more tragic of tales.

The road in is a lonely one on this particular afternoon; a smattering of cars pass and the recent rain has turned the ground into a muddy mess. I scan the graves of the many forgotten until I see one that towers above the rest. Here lies the body of a heartbroken man, James Leslie Darcy.

Noted fistic writer of Darcy's era, Jim Donald once said: "the poet and the painter live on in the indestructible sonnet or mural of their creation. So with Darcy. Memory fades, and we old fogies who glimpsed him in the days of his glory have only memories to feed on. Swiftly they fade and eyes and ears forget, as I have said it is the tragedy of the pugilist. His work is undone in the doing."

After almost 100 years since the passing of Darcy, this rings especially true, most everywhere but Maitland. The ghost of Les Darcy still walks among the people of this town. You can feel his presence. His image is all around, his name seemingly forever linked with the place. Just ask anyone who has lived in the Maitland area whether they know who Les Darcy is and a look of pride is what you will often get in return.

Pride wasn't always synonymous with Darcy though.

'The Maitland Wonder,' as he was known, gained an almost unfathomable amount of admiration during his short time as a fighter but just as quickly as the public had placed the young man on a pedestal, they snatched it away as swiftly as a vulture takes to a carcass.

During his whirlwind ring career Darcy had bested a profusion of high-class opponents. He won a version of the world's middleweight title, the Commonwealth middleweight title and the Australian middleweight and heavyweight titles. Such was the skill that Darcy wielded with his fists that he had been described by many as the greatest living exponent of the fistic arts the world had ever seen. His quality as a fighter was never in question, his character however was.

The defamation of Darcy was vicious and unconscionable. The First World War was in full effect by 1916 and the push to have Darcy's involvement began in earnest. If the war effort could gain a popular champion such as Les for the cause then perhaps many others would follow suit and volunteer. The problem lay in the fact that Darcy wasn't of legal age, yet.

Darcy had attempted to sign up to the war effort on a number of occasions but as he was under 21 years-of-age it was left for his mother to decide if he should be allowed to go and she had refused steadfastly. Whilst many other men had lied about their age to enlist to fight in Europe, for someone as famous as Darcy that was never an option.

In an effort to 'help the cause,' Darcy boxed in around sixty exhibitions. He raised between \$60,000 and \$75,000 but that wasn't to be enough as the campaign to get him on side soured. The Innisfail

Evening Chronicle chronicled the story of Darcy's life in 1944, many years after his death, showing the extent to which Darcy was singled out.

"Darcy was a marked man—the victim of a sustained whispering campaign that singled him out from his fellows. The authorities in their wisdom were confident that the conscription bill would pass and they were taking no chances with such an outstanding athlete as Darcy. He explained that he could not find any suitable opponents in this country, that he wanted to go to America to garner the thousands of pounds awaiting him there. He offered to post a guarantee of 1000 pounds that he would return to Australia within six months then enlist. The offer was turned down flat."

Darcy was ostracized for wanting to travel to America to box, singled out for merely wanting to set his family up. There were many men of legal age still travelling overseas at the same time but Darcy was the one they had put the target on. White feathers, a symbol of cowardice, were sent to him and as one newspaper of the time put it, the 'stay-at-home patriots,' derided the young boxer, claiming he was a slacker.

With Darcy's 21st birthday fast approaching, his promoter Reginald 'Snowy' Baker publicly claimed that unless Darcy enlisted he would get no more fights in the Commonwealth. The writing was on the wall for Les. It was an underhanded crusade against a man that was the sole provider for eleven family members, as noted boxing scribe W.F. Corbett stated in one of his columns in Sydney's The Referee newspaper.

"Les Darcy is, and for some years has been the sole support of his family. It is a big family. His father is crippled and bedridden. His one elder brother is a hopeless cripple. One younger brother, 14 years old, earns a few cents a day in a bakery. The others range in age down to infant class."

On the eve of a referendum on compulsory conscription, Darcy done the unthinkable, he set sail for America. With his manager, E.T. O'Sullivan, Darcy boarded the ship the 'Hattle Luckenbach,' bound for Chile. Once there he changed ships and sailed on to New York in search of big fights.

Darcy's arrival was big news in the Big Apple, fight fans had been regaled on the wonders of his ring prowess but the good will was to be short lived.

Most of the bad press that came Darcy's way was via his split with O'Sullivan. There are conflicting reports as to why the pair went their separate ways but there was little doubt that O'Sullivan's good friend Bat Masterson went to bat for him.

Masterson, an old Wild West gun fighter, was the boxing editor of New York's Daily Telegraph and went to certain lengths to portray Darcy in a bad light. In a letter to Sydney's The Referee newspaper, Masterson let fly about Darcy's lack of loyalty to O'Sullivan.

"Les Darcy might be a corking fighter according to the Queensbury rules. He might even be great. But that is about all anyone can say for him. He certainly has shown none of the traits of a good sport since his arrival in this country. And worst of all, he has given every evidence of being utterly lacking in gratitude and loyalty for a friend."

To make matters worse, word had reached America that Darcy was a shirker and that he ran from his duty to his country, all this despite the fact that he was still not of age when he left and that the referendum for compulsory conscription was in fact voted down by the people of Australia.

Masterson was on pretty good terms with the Governor of New York, Charles Whitman. Whitman saw to it that Darcy was barred from fighting there and not long after other states followed suit. Things were looking grim for the boy from Maitland.

Just when it seemed things were looking up for Darcy, the end came hastily. He had signed up to the United States Army's aviation reserve corps in Memphis and was finally given permission to fight in the U.S. When it happened, such a sudden and swift deathly blow to an already beaten man, sadness fell over the people of Australia. Les Darcy was dead.

It started with an infected tooth that developed into an infection of the tonsils that became pneumonia. He never did get the chance to showcase his wonders in America. There were many who claimed he died of a broken heart, one such case reported by W.F. Corbett.

"Physicians announced that Darcy's teeth were causing the trouble. His friends knew better. The sudden news that he might fight in America had affected his heart, they said. Every treatment known to medical science was given him, but there is no cure for a broken heart. He couldn't forget the 'slacker' part."

The sorrow that enveloped Australia was undoubtedly tinged with a little guilt. Darcy was a good and wholesome young man who never smoked or drank and wanted nothing more than to provide for his beloved mother and family. The slander against him was now being seen for what it was, unduly cruel and harsh.

Thousands traveled from Sydney, Newcastle and interstate to pay their respects to Darcy. Sydney's The Referee newspaper reported on the crowds when Darcy's body arrived back home.

"It is estimated that over 12,000 people viewed the body through the glass top of the coffin during the few hours allowed them. For quite a while the flow of humanity—men, women and children—continued at the rate of probably 60 a minute, and there were people who asserted that at times they counted fully 200 a minute just before 6 p.m."

The funeral was the same.

"The estimates of the attendance at the funeral and along the line of route are between 35,000 and 40,000, but the latter would be nearer the mark."

Darcy's story is one of adulation, persecution and ultimately redemption through death. He's mostly a forgotten man these days but not in the little old town of Maitland. His ghost still wanders those streets, the people welcoming his every move and memory. His image is a reminder of his strength of character and his devotion to his family. His gravestone reads: "A tribute to his unsurpassed brilliancy as a boxer, and in testimony to his high and lovable character. And of the uprightness and integrity of his life."

Darcy may very well have died of a broken heart but in death it's the virtue of his heart that is so thoroughly celebrated. You can feel it beat in the veins of Maitland to this very day.

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