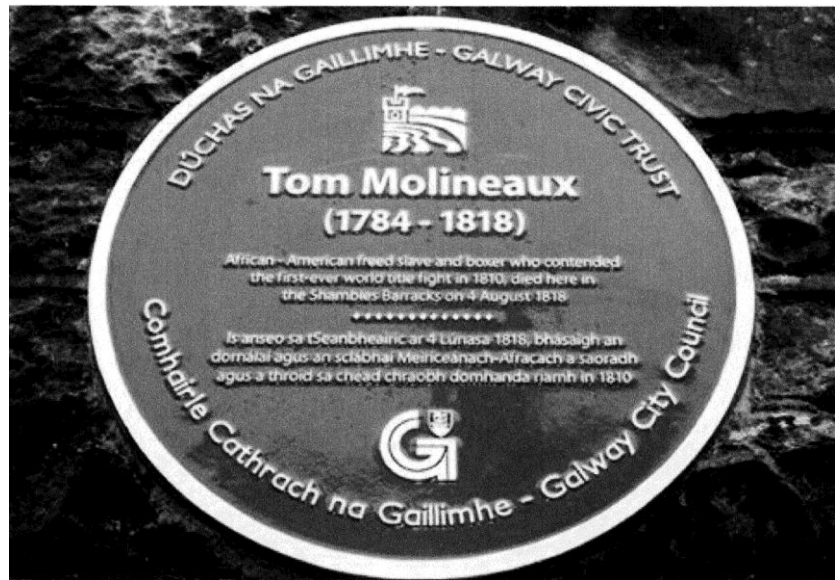


Tom Molineaux remembered 200 years after his death

By Patrick Myler

Two hundred years after his lonely death on the west coast of Ireland, Tom Molineaux has been honored with the erection of a commemorative plaque in the city of Galway. The former American black slave, who rose to world fame in the bare-knuckle prizefighting and twice challenged unsuccessfully for the English heavyweight championship, died on August 4, 1818.

Last November, Galway City Museum staged a small exhibition dedicated to Molineaux. As well as providing written material and illustrations, I was honored to be invited to give a talk on the pugilist's eventful life and his sad decline towards death in a place far, far from home. The plaque, inscribed in the English and Irish languages, is installed on the wall of St Patrick's national school, built on the site of a former British Army barracks where Tom spent his final days under the care of three drummers from the 77th (East Middlesex) Regiment band. He was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in St James' cemetery at Mervue, on the outskirts of Galway city.



Born and raised as a slave on a tobacco plantation in Virginia, Molineaux gained his freedom after winning for his owner a large sum of money wagered on him beating the pride of another plantation in a bare-knuckle bout. His master had also promised him \$500 if he won the fight.

Now a free man, Molineaux set off for New York, where he worked as a dockside laborer while picking up extra cash in unregulated pugilistic encounters. None of these fights were reported in the newspapers as America had yet to catch the boxing bug. England was where it was all happening in that regard and Molineaux packed his meagre belongings and headed across the Atlantic Ocean in search of fame and fortune.

Taken under the wing of another black American, Bill Richmond, who had been moderately successful in English rings, Molineaux embarked on a winning streak leading to a challenge to the English champion, Tom Cribb. Promoted as the first major international prizefight, and therefore a legitimate world title encounter, the showdown took place at Coptal Common, about half-way between London and

Brighton, on December 18, 1810.

One writer observed that Cribb's admirers "laughed at the pretensions of the Black, declaring that he was a grossly overrated fighter, and laid odds that the champion would thrash him inside a quarter of an hour". But many good judges who had seen Molineaux fight were by no means sure of Cribb's success and thought the champion faced the toughest job he had ever undertaken. Another observer felt that Molineaux's foreignness disturbed the English boxing fraternity – known as the Fancy – as did his color, as it raised the prospect that England might not only lose the championship, a symbol of national virility, but that the title would pass to a black man, a representative of a perceived inferior race.



The open-air ring was pitched on wooden boards which meant, with the rain coming down steadily from early morning, the contestants would find it difficult to keep their feet. Spectators had to navigate muddy fields and pools of water to reach the battle site. Molineaux's backers wanted the fight postponed. How could a man born in a warm, dry climate be expected to do himself justice in such atrocious conditions? Their plea fell on deaf ears.

Dukes and lords braved the horrible weather to take up prime positions nearest the ring, while more delicate gentry elected to watch the action from the roofs of their carriages parked at the back of the crowd. The Prince of Wales, later to become King George the Fourth, was a boxing fan and would have loved to be there but, advised that it would be considered a breach of royal decorum, he sent a servant to write down every incident of note that could be recounted to him later.

Molineaux was first to enter the ring, to a ripple of applause. This was nothing compared to the reception accorded to the English champion. Such was the volume of cheers that they could be heard miles beyond the confines of the common. As the contestants met in the centre of the ring, it was noticeable that Cribb, at 5ft 10ins, had a two-inch advantage, but their weights were equal at around 14 stone (196 pounds). Molineaux looked the fitter of the two.

"His appearance was formidable indeed," noted a ringside scribe, "for though he stood just over 5ft 8ins, he was extraordinarily well muscled. His arms were remarkably long, round and powerful, his back and shoulders denoting gigantic strength."

Cribb, said the same writer, represented "a fine, stalwart specimen of English

manhood, broad, thickset, with great shoulder blades and a back like a wall. There was about him a calm, imperturbable air of dogged resolution, which compared favorably with Molineaux's ferocious expression".

Under the rules of bare-knuckle boxing drawn up by former English champion Jack Broughton, contestants fought to a finish, meaning a fight would go on until one man was so badly beaten or exhausted that he was forced to admit defeat, or a draw was declared. Rounds ended only when a contestant went down, so a round could last a couple of minutes or half an hour or more. Time would be called after half a minute's break. If one man failed to appear at the "scratch", a line marked out in the center of the ring, he was deemed to have lost. Wrestling moves were allowed and quite often a round would end when a competitor was thrown to the ground rather than being floored by a punch. It was considered good tactics if the standing man jumped or fell on his fallen adversary, thus driving the wind out of his body. Quite often, this left the victim so distraught that he was forced to quit.

When the fight with Cribb commenced, Molineaux went straight on the attack, but the champion met his rushes with precise blows to the head and body. Molineaux wrapped his arms around his rival and attempted to throw him to the ground, but it was Cribb who took the American down, to tremendous cheers from the partisan crowd. Bets were placed on who would be the first to draw blood. It was the American's downward chop that split Cribb's upper lip clean through to his teeth.

After 20 minutes of fierce action, Molineaux appeared to be having the better of it and the Englishman was showing signs of distress. Molineaux was as fresh as he was at the start and, acting on the advice of Richmond, his cornerman, was controlling his attacks well. The force of his blows was wearing Cribb out and, by the end of the 22nd round, the betting was four to one in the visitor's favor.

"On came the black like a maniac," enthused a reporter, "lashing his long arms like flails, beating Tom's guard down and raining blows on his bruised and battered face." Down went Cribb and, back in his corner, he looked a beaten man. He was unable to answer the call of "time" and the crowd gasped in dismay. The unimaginable had happened. Their proud English champion had been toppled from the throne by his audacious American challenger.

But wait. It was not over. What followed was a shameful act of skulduggery that denied Molineaux his legitimate right to be recognised as champion of the world.

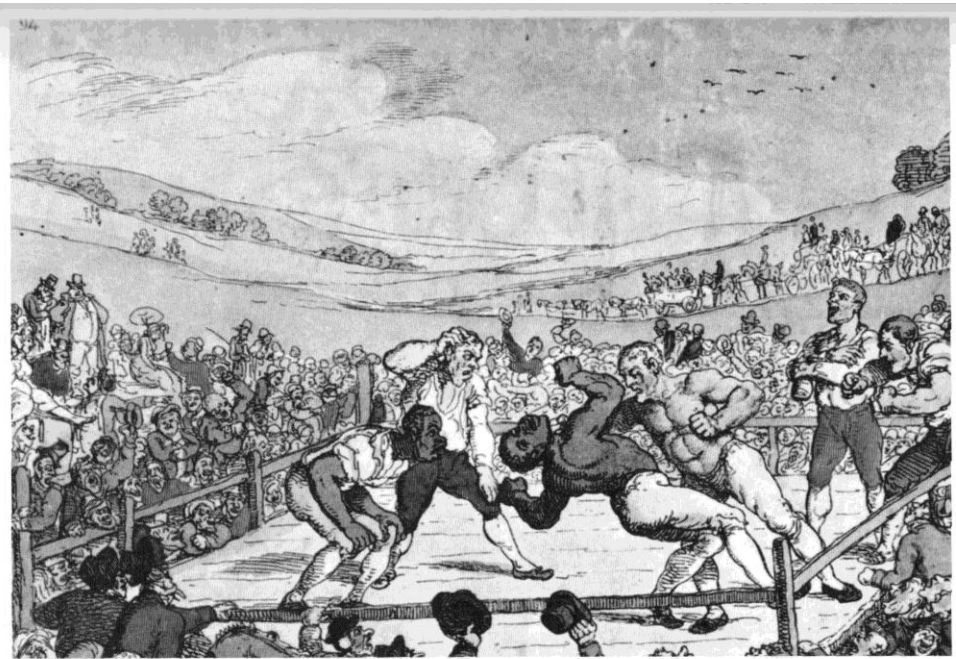
Joe Ward, one of Cribb's seconds, raced across the ring to accuse the American of hiding bullets in his fists to augment his punching power. Molineaux willingly opened his fists to show nothing was concealed. Undeterred, Ward insisted that a search be made of the ground around Molineaux's corner where he might have dropped the bullets. Nothing was found.

The commotion lasted several minutes until the umpires deemed that the contest should resume. Molineaux, indignant at the blatant robbery, had no choice but to continue the fight. By the time they squared off, however, Molineaux, used to a

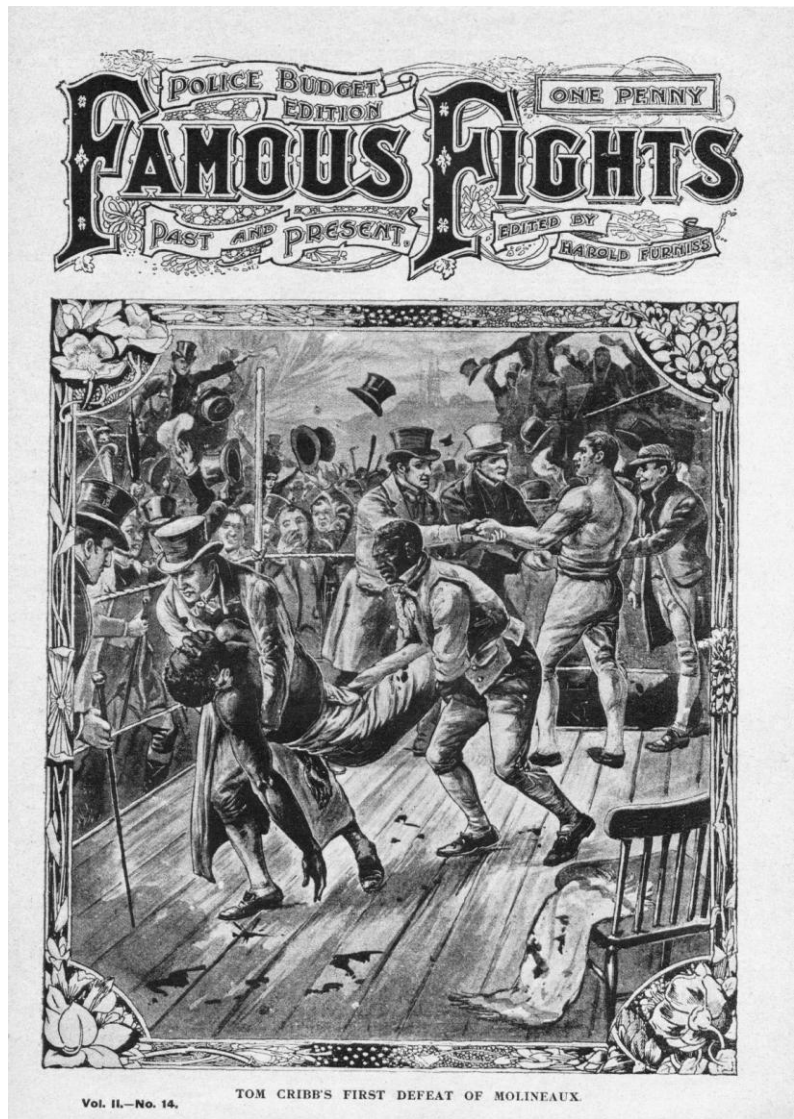
warm climate, was shivering from the wet and cold conditions and looked to be in much distress. During the argument, Cribb's seconds had cunningly wrapped their man in a blanket and given him a couple of shots of brandy to revive him.

From that point on Cribb took complete control. On top of the punishment Molineaux took, he was badly stunned when he fell and hit his head off one of the wooden corner posts. Cribb took advantage by striking his rival with a heavy blow to the throat that left him gasping. When "time" was called for the start of the 33rd round, Molineaux feebly lifted his head to inform Richmond, "I can fight no more". He was carried semi-conscious from the ring while the air was filled with shouts and cheers for the relieved English champion. While the British public lauded their man's "victory", there was much sympathy shown towards Molineaux for the manner of his defeat. The well established tradition of British fair play had been found wanting on this occasion, it was conceded.

While the American's backers brooded over what they considered "highway robbery", Molineaux drowned his disappointment in the many taverns and bawdy houses that London had to offer. Pierce Egan, the renowned author of *Boxiana*,



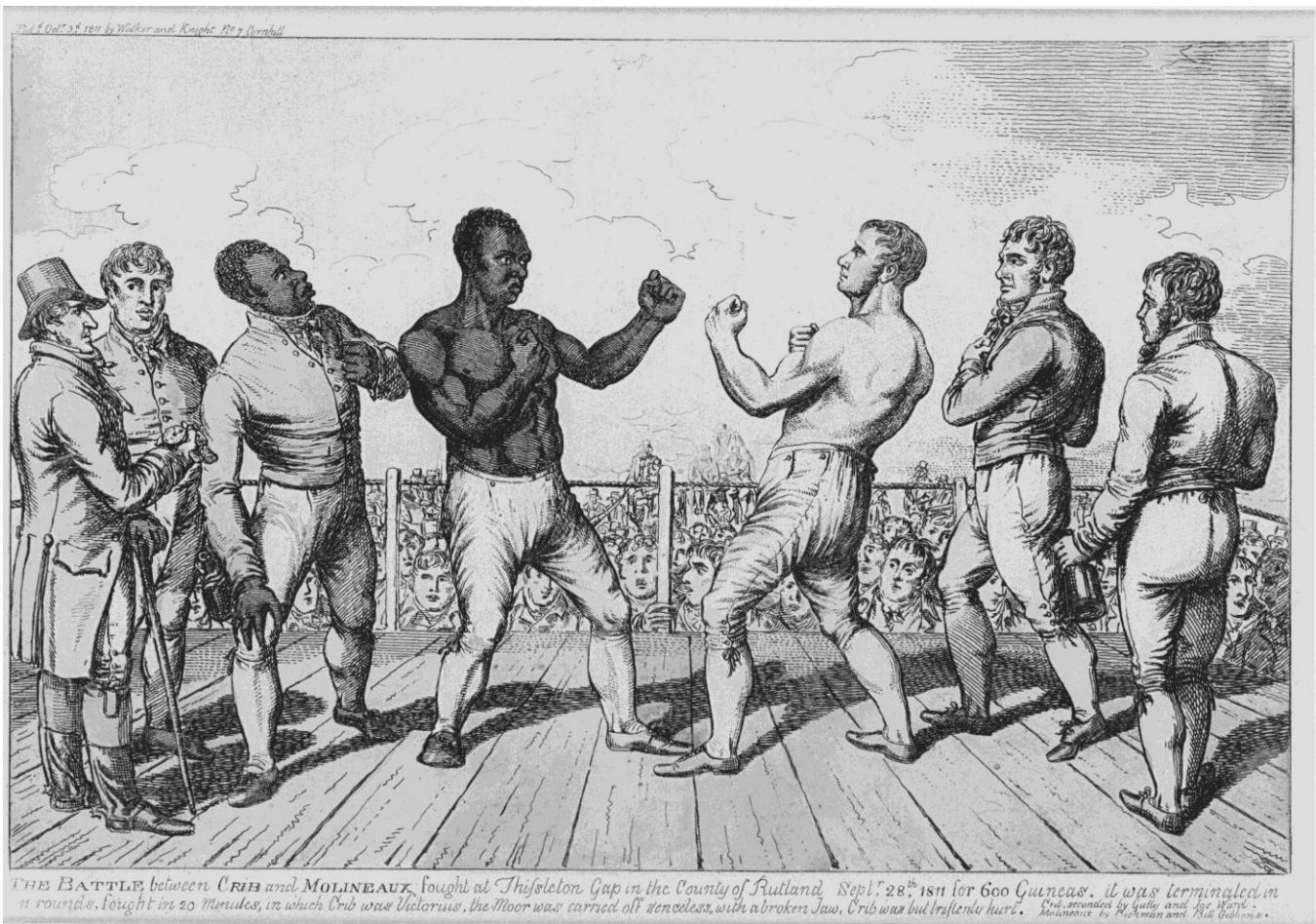
The bloody battle in all its fury, with Cribb on the attack.



wrote in his colorful style, "The Black naturally had a taste for gaiety, a strong passion for dress, was amorously inclined and full of gallantry. It is not surprising that the charms of the softer sex should interest the attention of the lusty Moor".

In the spring of 1811, through the newspapers, Molineaux issued a challenge to Tom Cribb for a return match. In the letter, written on his behalf, he expressed the hope that "the circumstances of my being of a different color will not in any way operate to my prejudice".

Cribb accepted the challenge and went straight into training under the expert care of Captain Robert Barclay, the well known trainer and long-distance walker. The English champion accepted that his lack of full fitness in the first match had badly affected him in the long, gruelling encounter. Barclay took him to train at his country estate in the Scottish highlands and turned him out in the best shape of his fighting life. Cribb's weight was reduced from 16 stone (224 pounds) to 13 stone six pounds (188 pounds). Molineaux, on the other hand, spurned the best advice of Richmond and his other backers to train properly. Weakened by too much heavy drinking and passionate flings, he was in no shape to take on the man considered the best fist-fighter in the world.



Twenty thousand spectators, comprised of aristocrats and commoners, rich and poor, gathered at Thistleton Gap, where the three counties of Leicester, Lincoln and Rutland met, on September 29, 1811 in anticipation of an epic encounter. Shortly

before noon, Cribb sprang into the ring and bowed to the cheering crowd. He was followed a few moments later by Molineaux, who had reportedly wolfed down a whole chicken and an apple pie, washed down with a gallon of beer. Although the betting odds were three to one for Cribb, the crowd eyed the American challenger with deep apprehension, knowing how close he had come to toppling the champion nine months earlier.

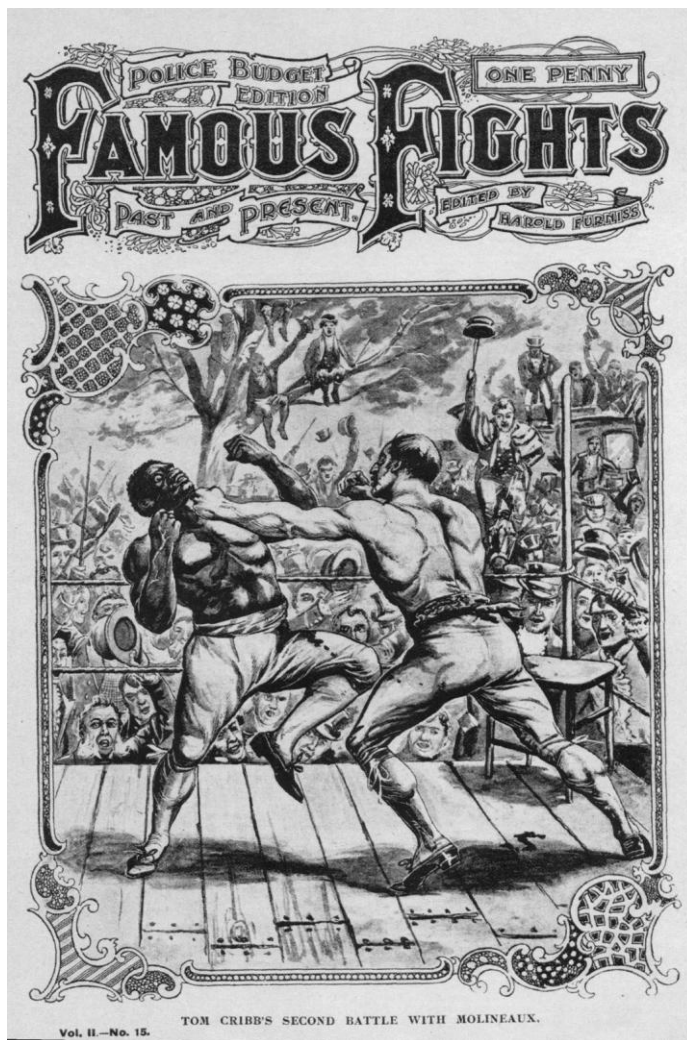
Whatever about his lack of fitness, Molineaux sailed straight into action and pounded his opponent fiercely. By the fourth round, reported the London Times, "Cribb was bleeding from every organ" but he smiled to show his confidence and "rallied in the first style of manliness". Cribb gave as good as he got in the following exchanges, but a terrific blow raised a lump as big as a goose egg on his right eye, which was soon tightly closed.

For several rounds it appeared that the American's strength would carry him to victory, but Cribb, aware that Molineaux's lack of fitness would tell in the long run, played a patient game. He used clever footwork to keep his distance, letting his opponent waste more and more energy in the chase. Molineaux looked "dead beat" before a tremendous punch felled him like a log. His jaw was broken from the force of the hit.

It was all over in the next round, the 12th. Molineaux, completely exhausted, fell down and shook his head in despair while his conqueror danced a Scottish reel in celebration. The fight had lasted 20 minutes. The winner's earnings topped 400 pounds (7,780 dollars at today's rate). A collection raised 50 pounds for Molineaux, adding to the 200 pounds (3,800 dollars now) he took from the purse.

The second defeat to Cribb sent Molineaux into depression and sad physical decline. Over the next four years he managed to win two more fights, but he was beaten in 14 rounds by George Cooper in March 1815 and never fought again. He teamed up with his conqueror, Cooper, on several tours of Britain, engaging in sparring exhibitions and teaching the art of boxing to anyone prepared to pay for lessons.

When public interest in their exhibitions waned, Molineaux and Cooper looked



for fresh fields to conquer. They took the boat to Ireland, where interest in boxing was beginning to grow, and were delighted to be greeted with wide enthusiasm on their arrival. For the Irish, it was quite a novelty to watch two such renowned pugilists perform, even if only in harmless sparring bouts. Soon, however, the clamor grew for one or the other to engage in a real fight.

Both fighters were keen to earn real money and what better opponent to draw the crowds than the champion of Ireland, Dan Donnelly. A meeting was arranged between the three boxers to discuss the possibilities. Molineaux was the first to issue a challenge to Donnelly, but he was upset when the Irishman said he preferred to take on Cooper. The American flew into a rage, accusing Donnelly of cowardice and racial prejudice. Donnelly, however, stood his ground and agreement was reached for him to face Cooper on the Curragh of Kildare, about 30 miles from Dublin, in November 1815.

The site of Donnelly's wildly celebrated victory over Cooper is marked with an 8ft monument alongside the carved-out footprints of the Irish hero as he strode up the grassy slope to his carriage. The spot is known to this day as Donnelly's Hollow.

As for Molineaux, he stayed on while Cooper returned to England. Within a relatively short time, he was so broken in health as to be described as a walking skeleton. His last days were spent in the British Army barracks in Galway city, sleeping in a cupboard in the army bandsmen's quarters. On August 4, 1818 he drew his last breath. The cause of his death was not recorded. It has been variously attributed to tuberculosis, liver failure and "drinking himself to death". A fever epidemic sweeping the west of Ireland could also have done the damage. He was just 34 years of age.

Although much has been spoken and written about Tom Molineaux over the 200 years since his death, it was not until 1997 that his fine contribution to the sport's history was acknowledged when he was inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame.

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