

UNTWISTING THE CYCLONE

Solving The Mystery Of Old-Time Heavyweight

Billy Warren

By Patrick Myler

Slowly, painfully, he would shuffle his arthritic legs, with the aid of a Malacca cane, through Dublin city center to his daily perch outside the General Post Office on O'Connell Street.

If it rained, he would switch to dry land under the canopy of the nearby Metropole Cinema, or shelter in an alcove around the corner on Princes Street, just a few yards from the site of La Scala Opera House, where Mike McTigue snatched the world light heavyweight title from that misguided optimist, Battling Siki, on St. Patrick's Day in 1923.

Passers-by would direct a friendly wave or a "Hello, Cyclone," and he would smile and tip his bowler hat in acknowledgement.

The tall, well-built black man, smartly dressed in a long Crombie overcoat, gleaming white collar, flashy tie or cravat, and a carnation in his buttonhole, cut a striking figure as he quietly observed the daily comings and goings of the native Irish over half a century ago.

Some say he stood on a wooden box, painted black and advertising Nugget boot polish, a rather demeaning way to earn a buck, if true. Others don't remember a box.

To those wary of approaching him, he

remained a mystery figure. Although they knew his name, they wondered where had he come from, and why had he settled in Dublin, so far from home.



Warren (pictured) was somewhat of a mystery man. No one is sure where he was born or how many fights he had. But he ended his days living in Ireland, a local character who hung out on the streets of Dublin, telling tall tales about his boxing career.

To those who cared to listen, "Cyclone" Billy Warren would happily tell of his worldwide wanderings, his long career in the ring, and how he had "fought Jack Johnson six times."

While no one disputed that Warren was an entertaining storyteller, who could tell how much of what he said was fact, invented, or generously embellished?

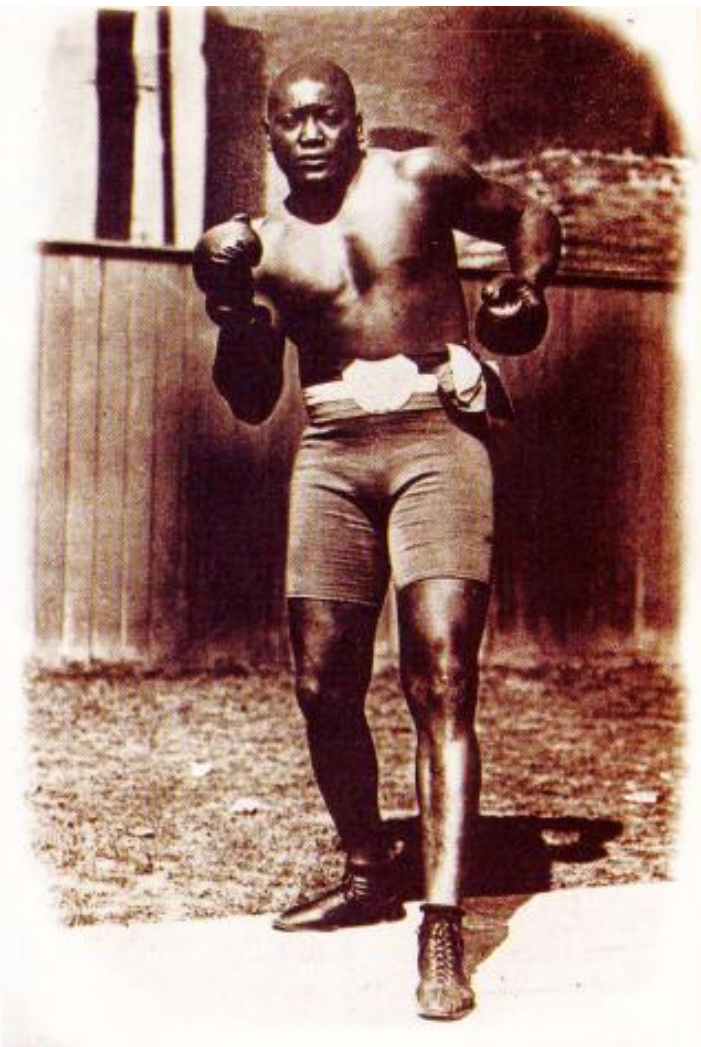
Firstly, his name wasn't Billy. It was Joseph. And then there was the question of his nationality. Though often billed as "the colored heavyweight champion of Australia," it seems most likely that he was an American.

Some sources gave Boston, Massachusetts, as his birthplace, others that he was from Pennsylvania. Author Bernard Neary, in *North Of The Liffey—A Character Sketchbook*, published in 1984, said Warren was the son of a black slave forcibly taken to Australia, from where he made his way to the U.S. as a young man. No confirmation of his place of origin was contained in the newspaper obituaries at the time of his death in 1951.

As to his boxing career, while the records show he fought many well-known heavyweights in many different countries, other listed bouts have proved more difficult to authenticate.

Take his supposed series with Johnson. The way Warren told it, he was "pretty green" when he faced the future world heavyweight champion in a 10-round no decision bout in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, on Independence Day in 1908.

"I didn't know much about covering up



Warren claims to have fought both Peter Jackson (left) and Jack Johnson (right). But recent research reveals that "Cyclone" never boxed either man.

and defense, but I could take a good beating without swallowing the anchor," he informed an *Irish Press* reporter some 40 years later.

Johnson, he recalled, was not only the best heavyweight in the world when they fought, but also a great character who was impossible to rile. "You could call him all the names in the world and he'd only laugh—and the more he laughed, the more he fought."

An interesting story, sure, but did the fight really happen? Well, not on that date it didn't.

For Johnson was a long way from Wilkes-Barre right then. He was, in fact, in England, keeping up his persistent chase after world champion Tommy Burns, who steadfastly refused to face the leading contender. Burns was about to leave Europe

for Australia when Johnson, needing to finance his efforts to stay on the elusive Canadian's trail, made a couple of ring appearances in Plymouth, a seaside town on England's southwest coast.

The dates of his exhibition with Al McNamara (June 11) and his knockout of Ben Taylor (July 31) make nonsense of Warren's claim to a July 4 joust with Johnson in the U.S.

Maybe Warren's memory was fading when he told the story, or perhaps he just got his dates mixed. But nowhere in any of the published records of Johnson's career does Warren's name appear.

While contests between two black men sometimes escaped notice in those times, it's unlikely that at least one of the alleged encounters between Johnson and Warren would not have been traced by diligent

record keepers had they occurred.

THE RING's founder and long-time editor, Nat Fleischer, in a short chapter devoted to Warren in Volume One of his *Black Dynamite* series, stated that he "challenged Jack Johnson and Philadelphia Jack O'Brien to a finish fight for a side bet of \$5,000, but neither was willing to meet him."

Referring to Warren as "the Australian Giant," Fleischer said he stood 6'1", weighed 210 pounds, and was athletically built. "He possessed considerable cleverness and also was a pretty good hitter," concluded Fleischer.

One of Warren's best fights, said Fleischer, was with Jack Mace in Melbourne, which he won by a knockout in the 17th round. Other notable victories were over George Barton, Sam McCarthy, Dick

Hendry, Tom Baker, Jack Hart, and Dan Kelly. Fleischer probably got his information from the *Police Gazette*, which credited the wins to Warren in an October 1907 article.

But the paper was wrong, as was Fleischer, in claiming that Cyclone had ended the career of the great Peter Jackson. Regrettably, many record compilers have perpetuated the myth that Warren and Jackson fought a 25-round draw in Melbourne on December 2, 1899. Fresh evidence has established beyond doubt that the fight never happened.

According to Fleischer, Jackson, who was shamefully ducked by world heavyweight champion John L. Sullivan, ostensibly due to his color but more likely because he was too dangerous, and who held Sullivan's conqueror, James J. Corbett, even for 61 rounds before it was declared "no contest," was "on his last legs" when he fought Warren.

Australian Bob Petersen, who is writing a biography of the renowned West Indies fighter, has uncovered the truth about the non-event. He confirms that Jackson was not in Australia in December 1899.

Already in the grip of tuberculosis that would kill him within two years, Jackson was a patient in the Royal Jubilee Hospital in Victoria, capital of British Columbia, where he was admitted on September 14 and discharged on December 12. After a spell of convalescence, he sailed for San Francisco on March 18, 1900, and three days later journeyed on to Australia, arriving, after a 10-year absence, on Easter Sunday (April 15).

"There was a boxer in Queensland at this time who went by the name of Young Jackson," said Petersen. "It could be that he was the one who fought Warren, but I have read everything I could find in the newspapers on boxing in Melbourne in December 1899 and could not find any mention of Warren."

If Cyclone did not fight either Jackson or Johnson, he certainly did square up to another of the outstanding black heavyweights of the era in Sam McVey. It happened in Paris, France, on April 2, 1909 (Some records show it as April 9). *Police Gazette* said Warren was outclassed and it was a wonder he survived the first round after being floored twice. He was down

twice more in the second before being counted out.

It's from this period, when Warren was based in Europe, that his record becomes easier to follow. He fought on and off for another 20 years after the McVey setback, losing far more often than he won. But contemporary reports suggested he was hard done by when he was disqualified

against "Young" John L. Sullivan "for hitting in holds." In his first bout since losing to McVey, Warren faced Sullivan in Belfast, Northern Ireland, for a £100 purse and a £25 side stake. Warren, reported *Police Gazette*, had his opponent in a bad way and would have won but for a biased referee. During a clinch in the 11th round, Sullivan was struck and "went down like a



One well-known fighter Warren did face was Sam McVey (pictured), but it wasn't a very glorious moment for Cyclone, who was stopped in the second round of the 1902 bout held in Paris, France.

log." Apparently there was a prior agreement between the fighters that there would be no punching during clinches.

Sullivan, an Irish-American from Massachusetts, was an annoying presence at ringside a month later when Cyclone was pronounced Irish heavyweight champion after knocking out Jem Roche in three rounds. *Mirror Of Life*, however, disputed the claim as the rounds were of two minutes duration and Warren was not an Irishman.

Roche, who had lasted all of 88 seconds in a world heavyweight title challenge to Tommy Burns a year earlier, was described as "hog fat and about three stone overweight" for the Warren encounter. A hard blow sent the Wexford blacksmith crashing to the floor, his head hitting the boards with a thud. He took 15 minutes to recover and was attended by a doctor in his dressing room.

After accepting the cheers of the crowd, the new "Irish champion" was held back as he tried to "get at" Sullivan.

Roche got himself into somewhat better shape for the return, outpointing Warren over 20 rounds. Cyclone, his nose broken as early as the fourth round and under sustained attack, fought gamely, but was a much-battered figure at the finish.

Philadelphia's Jim Maher, whose claim to be a brother of Peter Maher, one-time world heavyweight title claimant, was disputed, was forced to retire in the fourth round with an injured arm when he met Warren in Birkenhead, England. The same location saw Cyclone drop a 20-round decision to George Gunther of Australia. He managed to floor Gunther in a rematch, but still lost on points, this time over 10 rounds.

A possible clue to the phantom fights with Johnson and Jackson is that Warren,

during his English sojourn, fought "Young" Jack Johnson and "Kid" Jackson, losing to both. Could it be that Cyclone, while reminiscing in later years, conveniently "forgot" that the pair he fought were not the original of the species?

After a repeat loss to Young Johnson in



Warren claimed the Irish heavyweight title after knocking out Jem Roche, but as he wasn't Irish, some critics refused to accept him as the national champion. It all became academic when Roche (pictured) won a rematch.

1913, his eighth successive defeat, Warren took a six-year break, then reappeared in a Dublin ring to take on Jim Coffey, "The Roscommon Giant." Coffey, one of the better "white hopes" during Johnson's championship reign, was a big hitter and sent Warren crashing for the count in the first round.

Warren, now just in it for the money, fought twice in 1922. Belfast favorite

Davy Magill forced him to retire after two rounds, and Tom Cowler, one-time protégé of James J. Corbett, also dispatched him in two.

After a seven-year gap, Billy made his final ring appearance, at age 52, in Belfast on February 15, 1929, dropping a six-round decision to "Yankee" Quinn.

Married to Louise, a Wolverhampton woman he had met in England before moving to Ireland, Warren would be seen on daily shopping expeditions, carrying the couple's meager needs in a large carpet bag to their single-room accommodation on Nelson Street, on the city's north side. Always, he would linger for a while outside the General Post Office to talk to friends and strangers alike.

Retired policeman and amateur boxing coach Mick Sutton recalls him as a regular customer at the Scotch House bar, near O'Connell Bridge, and "a quiet, independent man who wouldn't let you buy him a drink."

At the age of 74, Warren was taken seriously ill and was admitted to St. Kevin's Hospital, where he died on March 16, 1951. He was buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery. The death notice in the *Irish Independent* said his passing was "deeply regretted—he fought the good fight," while the *Evening Herald* noted that Dublin had lost one of its best loved characters.

Today, someone who stood idly on street corners would be regarded with caution, even suspicion, especially one who took delight in growling at frightened youngsters: "Come here, me big black man who eats white children." Back then, people got the joke. ■

Patrick Myler is a freelance writer based in Dublin, Ireland. He is the author of several boxing books and an occasional contributor to this magazine.