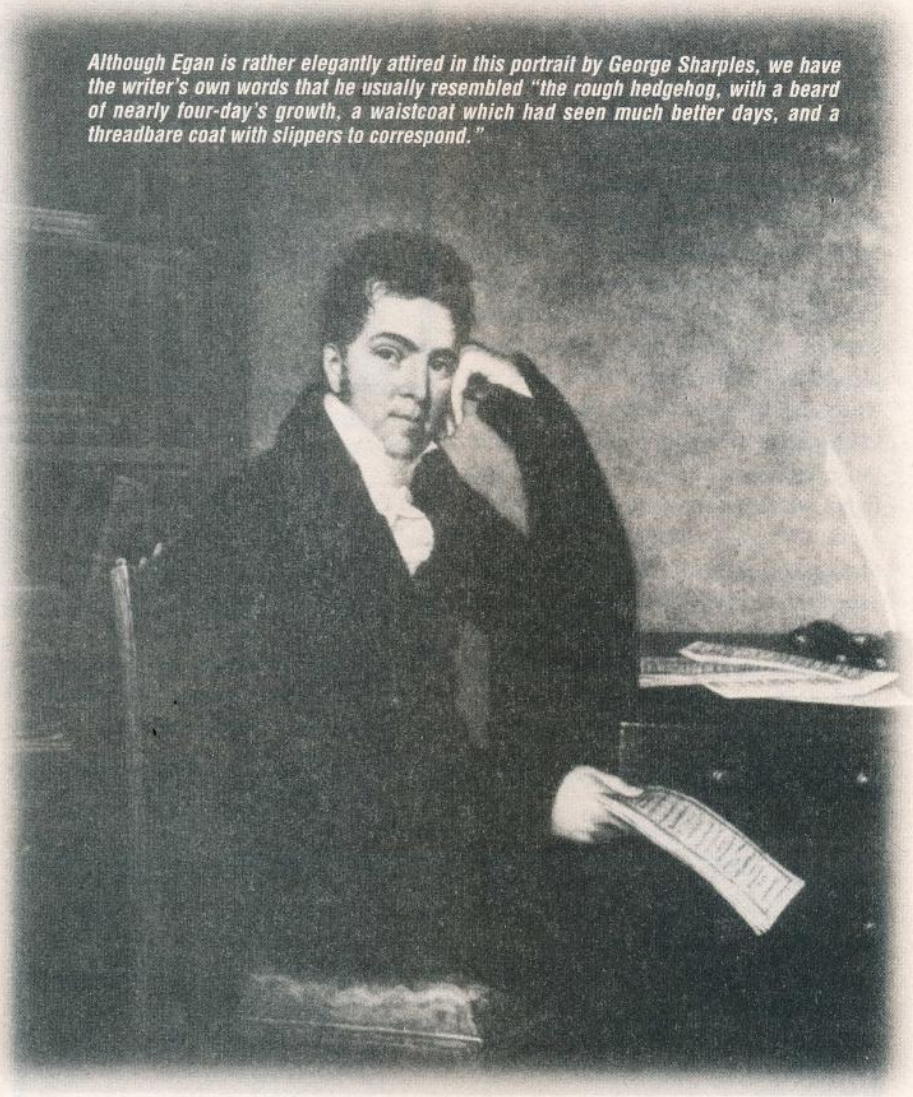
JOURNALISTIC PIONEER
PIERCE EGAN

More Than Just The First Famous Boxing Writer



Although Egan is rather elegantly attired in this portrait by George Sharples, we have the writer's own words that he usually resembled "the rough hedgehog, with a beard of nearly four-day's growth, a waistcoat which had seen much better days, and a threadbare coat with slippers to correspond."

By Patrick Myler

"The man who has not read ***Boxiana*** *is ignorant of the power of the English language."*

—BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE, 1820

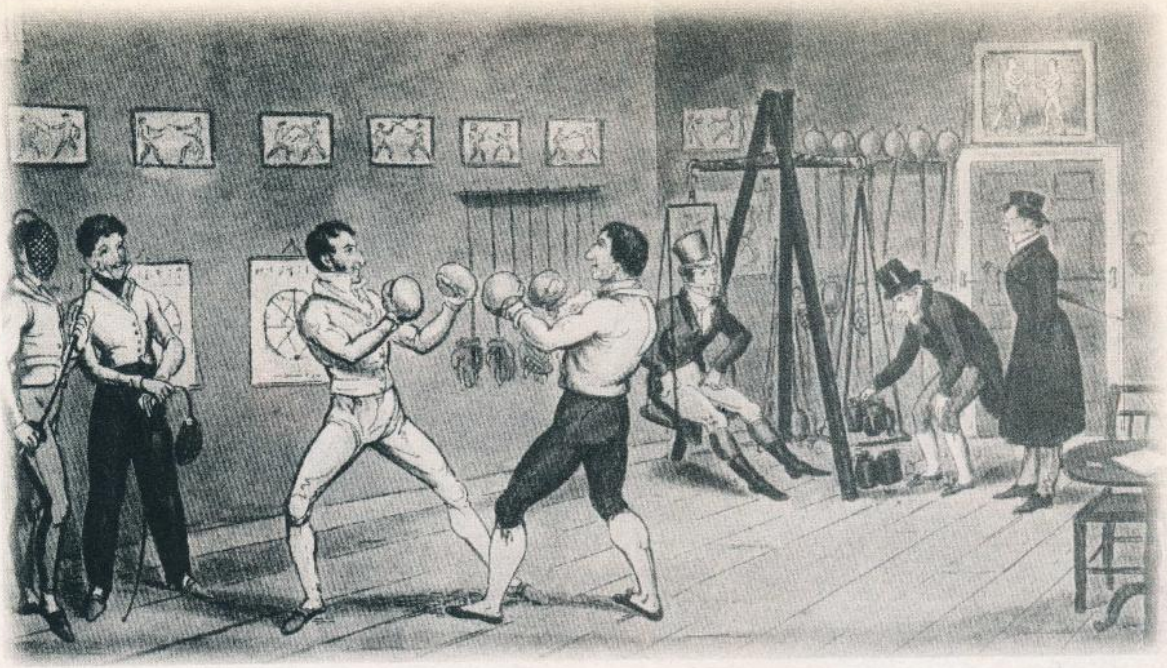
Today's boxing journalists truly are a pampered lot. Not only have they every modern convenience at their fingertips to make their jobs easier, such as facts-filled press kits, mobile telephones, and laptop computers, but usually there's free booze and snacks laid on by a grateful promoter.

So they're one big happy bunch, getting paid well for what most fight fans would do for nothing. Right? No way.

You'll hear more moans from the average ringside scribe than you will if your hotel room is next to the bridal suite. His equipment isn't working properly (the writer's, not the groom's). The big fight is on too late to catch his paper's deadline. His view is obscured by a ringpost or a phalanx of photographers, or he's stuck in the last row of the press section, where his ears get mangled by an audience drunk who loudly insists he knows more about the game than any overpaid hack. There might be trouble getting a cab back to his hotel, or the editor wants an updated color piece for the late edition.

Knock it off, guys. Count yourself lucky you weren't around in Pierce Egan's time.

Egan, whose jottings on the English bare knuckles prize ring inspired generations of boxing writers over the last 200 years, had to do his job the hard way.



Corinthian Tom takes a boxing lesson at John Jackson's boxing academy, while Jerry Hawthorn has his weight checked in a scene from Egan's Life In London. *The best-selling book, illustrated by the Cruikshank brothers, later became a play.*

The chaotic conclusion of the second Tom Cribb-Tom Molineaux fight by 19th-century artist Thomas Rowlandson was typical of the bare knuckle battles that Egan covered for various publications during his career as the era's leading boxing writer.

Having been tipped off about a coming fight—as the sport was illegal, advertising was risky—he would have to check out the date, time, and venue and make his own arrangements to get there. Horse-drawn vehicles, the only means of transportation, would be in big demand, so he would probably have to pay over the odds for his journey.

More often than not, he would then have to tramp across muddy fields and clamber over high fences to reach the scene of battle. If the law enforcers had gotten wind of the proposed encounter and prepared to swoop, Egan would join his fellow enthusiasts in a frantic escape bid. Attendance at a prize fight was as likely as participation to land you in jail or facing a hefty fine.

Once a safe site had been established, Egan would take his place amidst the noisy, sweaty, suffocating throng, trying his best to take notes of the fight while keeping a watchful eye for pickpockets, or dodging the whips wielded by burly crowd controllers. If it rained or snowed, he would have to abandon his jottings and rely on his memory when he sat down later to record his observations of the event.

But when Egan put pen to paper, what emerged was some of the most exciting, colorful, evocative prose ever written about boxing and its environment. Though he had his share of critics who ridiculed his unsophisticated style, he was one of the

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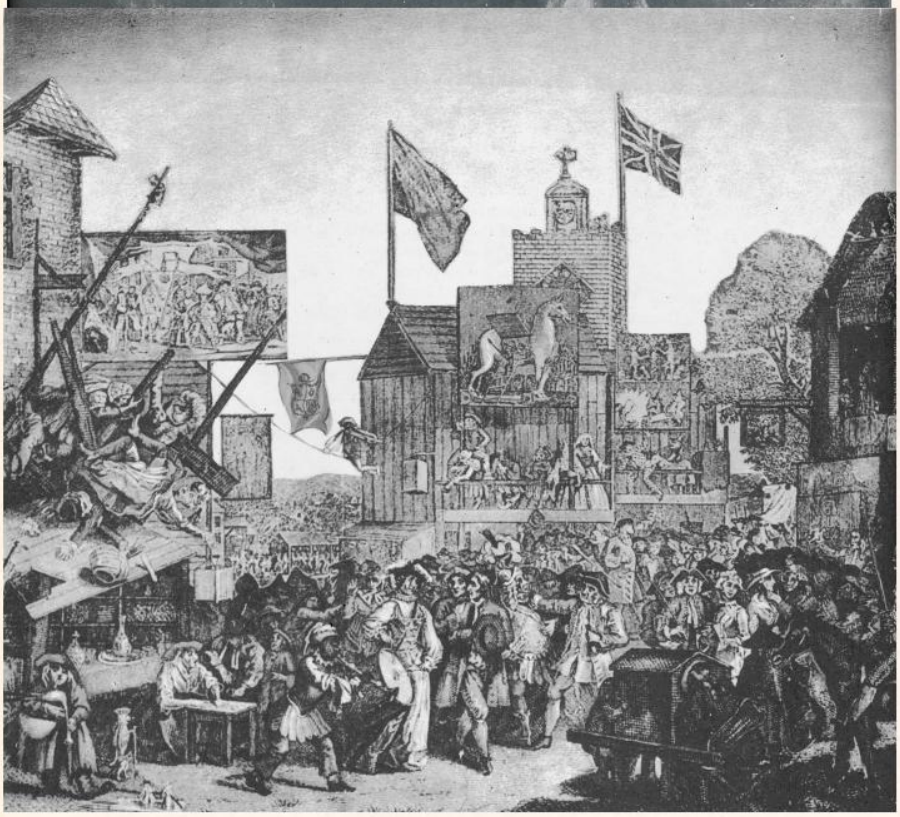

Pierce Egan

(Continued from page 33)

most widely read and admired sporting journalists of his day, and a great inspiration to others who took up the profession.

It was Egan's graphic firsthand reports, originally in the London *Weekly Dispatch* and later in the volumes of *Boxiana*, that gave his readers fresh insights into matters of the prize ring. They trusted the accuracy of his accounts and relished his vivacity.

In pre-Victorian England, noblemen and dustmen alike shared a passion for sport, especially pugilism, and eagerly scanned the columns of the newspapers for blow-by-blow accounts of battles between the giants of the ring. How better to exemplify the spirit, strength, and courage that had enabled the nation to emerge victorious from the long and bitter Napoleonic wars than through boxing?

Pugilism was not Egan's sole interest. He wrote plays, songs, novels, and epigrams, and appeared on stage as an actor. In his numerous writings, no one better depicted London's low life, with its gin palaces, flea-infested theaters, and popular "sports" such as cudgeling, cock fights, dog fights, and bull and bear baiting.

What Egan termed the "romance" of the great city would have big influence on famous writers such as Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and George Bernard Shaw. Dickens acknowledged that much of his insight into life in London's dark alleyways was due to the

light shone into those places by Egan's works.

There is ample evidence that Egan enjoyed every aspect of pre-Victorian sporting life. After a fight, he could usually be found in some smoke-filled tavern with the boxers and their supporters, sharing their joy of victory or dejection of defeat. Frank debate would frequently degenerate to flying oaths and fists.

Once, either suffering from physical damage or in a state of intoxication, he was bundled into a cab and taken home. On arrival, wrote a contemporary, he was extracted from his recumbent position at the bottom of the vehicle "rolled up after the manner of a hedgehog at the approach of winter" and was put in bed by a kindly neighbor. The next morning, none the worse for his nocturnal indulgence, he was back at the inn, ready to take up where he had left off.

A gregarious character with a penchant for exhibitionism, he vastly enjoyed singing his own songs at gatherings of the Fancy. He valued his standing with the sporting world, especially with the pugilistic fraternity, and was proud to chair meetings called to debate the development of the sport.

An indefatigable worker, Egan traveled all over Britain for reporting purposes and produced an astonishingly large number of books and pamphlets, as well as numerous columns of journalism. Though disappointed that he never made his mark as a serious dramatist, he rarely let anything dampen his spirits. "He always bounced back, full of new enthusiasm, bad puns, and happy facetiousness," wrote his biographer, J.C. Reid.

As a boxing writer, Egan is best known for his authorship of *Boxiana*, issued in five volumes between 1812 and 1829 (an additional volume was the work of John Badcock). Though widely acknowledged as a masterpiece, *Boxiana* needs to be approached with caution by the unwary reader, who may find it difficult to get in tune with Egan's eccentric style, his fondness for using capital letters and italics for emphasis, his proliferation of slang (much of it coined by himself), his picturesque metaphors, doggerel verse, and outrageous puns.

But the effort is hugely rewarding for those who stay the distance. Even a street-brawl between Dutch Sam, recognized as champion of the lightweights, and a man named Jones, who accosted a drunken Sam and challenged him to fight then and there, gives an insight into Egan's powers of observation and description:

"Sam, notwithstanding his intoxicated state, appeared to have the advantage, when Jones seized him by the hair of his head, threw him down, and beat him violently upon the stones. This act of cruelty operated contrary in its effect to what was expected by the perpetrator, by awakening Sam to a better recollection of what he was about. Sam started up, exclaiming, 'Take care, take care, for now I'm coming,' and put in such a stomacher as nearly deprived Jones of his breath, and followed it up by a tremendous hit over the eye, leveled this brute with the mud."

Of the second of former American slave Tom Molineaux's brave but futile bids to take the English heavyweight championship from Tom Cribb, Egan wrote: "The hardest frame could not resist the blows of the champion, and it is astonishing the Moor stood up to them so long. He was taken out of the ring senseless and could not articulate, and it was thought on the first examination that his jawbone and two of his ribs were fractured, while, on the contrary, Crib [Egan spelt it with one "b"] scarcely received a body blow, but his head was terribly out of shape."

Far from being repulsed by such savagery, the English looked upon boxing as an affirmation of masculine values such as prowess, vigor, and physical courage. Strength and "bottom" were the most admirable qualities in a prize fighter. The shedding of blood, or "claret," as Egan liked to call it, was part of its admirable picture.

"The English claret had flowed so freely," wrote Egan of one fight, "that never before or since did I see two men so thoroughly and handsomely painted with true red blood, from the crown of the head to the wristband. They would have made a rare subject for a painter."

Though his writings have been widely dissected and debated over the past two centuries, little is known about Pierce Egan the man. No record of his birth is known to exist, though Reid, in *Buck And Bruisers: Pierce Egan And Regency England* (published in 1971) thought he was probably born in 1774. What is known is that his father left Ireland to work as a road-making laborer in London, but whether that was before or after Egan was born is unclear. Around the age of 12, Egan got his first smell of ink when he was apprenticed to a printer. He later worked as a compositor with the firm of Smeeton's, while supplementing his earnings as a freelance writer.

It was George Smeeton who first published *Boxiana* in book form (it originally appeared in monthly paperbound sections, sold by subscription), although Egan wasn't named as the author. This was simply given as "One Of The Fancy." But by the time the second volume of *Boxiana* appeared, Egan got full credit on the title page. By then, he had gained his first job as a newspaper reporter on the *Weekly Dispatch*.

In 1819, in collaboration with the artist Robert Cruikshank, he produced an extraordinary work called *Picture Of The Fancy On The Road To Moulsey Hurst*. The panorama, 156 inches long by 2½ inches wide, with Cruikshank's painting accompanied by Egan's text, was issued in a carved wooden box. Beginning with the Fancy meeting in the Castle Tavern, it followed in brilliant detail their journey to the prize fight and, afterward, attendance at a bull-bait, concluding with a meeting the following day for settlement of bets.

In between his other volumes of *Boxiana*, the industrious Egan wrote a dictionary of slang and two widely acclaimed pamphlets on the trial and hanging of fight promoter John Thurell, convicted of murdering a money lender.

Life In London, written by Egan and illustrated by Cruikshank and his brother, George, was a huge success. Wittily telling the story of Corinthian Tom and his country cousin, the warmhearted Jerry Hawthorn, as they experienced London's high life and low life, including visits to Gentleman John Jackson's boxing academy and Tom Cribb's tavern, it became a best-seller.

"The Cruikshank brothers had accompanied Egan in his own 'rambles and sprees' gathering firsthand information for their joint production," wrote Tom Sawyer in *Noble Art*. "In fact, the unlikely trio were widely believed, at the time, to have been the originals of the resulting book's main characters. While the brothers can hardly be said to correspond to a pair of fashionable bucks, Egan, with his fondness for a 'bit of life' and an unending fund of excruciating puns, did bear a strong resemblance

to the Oxonian Bob Logic [another of the book's characters]."

The manners, dress, and behavior of Egan's heroes, Tom and Jerry (namesakes of the 20th century cartoon characters), were much imitated by "disorderly gentlemen" of the period who, when drunk, got their kicks out of knocking off policemen's helmets, or stealing and driving away hansom cabs, with the terrified passengers inside. *Life In London* even made it to the London stage, with the role of Corinthian Tom being played by Irish actor Tyrone Power, a great grandfather of the swashbuckling movie star of the same name.

By the mid-1820s, Egan was channeling his energies into other interests. He produced his own newspaper, *Pierce Egan's Weekly Courier To The Sporting, Theatrical, Literary And Fashionable World* (try shouting that on a street corner), became an actor, wrote a number of plays, and authored, among other works, *Pierce Egan's Book Of Sports*.

Though by then somewhat disillusioned with prize fighting, which was in decline, it was vintage Egan who commented on the meeting between the hitherto unbeaten Dick Curtis, "The Pet Of The Fancy," and Jack Perkins. Five minutes of the round had passed (at the time, rounds ended when either man fell to the ground) without either attempting a blow.

Egan wrote: "This most certainly was a new feature in the battles of Curtis, and extorted from the backers of the Pet that Perkins was a troublesome character. 'Go to work,' was the cry. Dick at length placed a slight facer and, in the exchange of hits, in a rally, he napted a rum one between the chaffer and the sneezer, which Spring [Perkins' second] called out, 'First blood, and we shall win.' This was another new feature. The Pet was on the alert, and planted a heavy blow on Perkins' domino box."

However, Curtis, the much lighter man, had the worst of things and was finally carried unconscious from the ring, while the victor acknowledged the cheers of the crowd. Egan noted that Perkins didn't escape entirely unscathed: "His nob was not much damaged, excepting a cut over the left eye. His mug was puffed a little, but his grub warehouse, we think, must have felt very tender from the numerous podgers Dick planted upon it."

After failing to persuade British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, to whom he wrote a letter, that he was entitled to state pension, Egan was sadly reduced, toward the end of his life, to lecturing on the art of self-defense in Dublin, Edinburgh, and Liverpool. He wrote his last book at the age of 71, a delightful effort entitled *Every Gentleman's Manual, Or A Lecture In The Art Of Self-Defense*, in which he looked back fondly on the sport he helped shape.

Egan was 74 when he died after suffering a stroke at his home in Regent's Park, London, on August 3, 1849. He left a widow, Mary, and several children. One of his sons, known as Pierce Egan the Younger, was a prolific author of popular novels, and third generation Pierce Egan, a teacher, published several works in an *Aid To The Classics* series.

Though he was, in his own words, "nothing else but a plain unlettered man," Egan made his literary mark. "Apart from his writings on pugilism," wrote John Ford in *Prizefighting: The Age Of Regency Boximania*, "Egan was to make major contributions to crime reporting, the cult of the picaresque, to the development of the popular newspaper, and to English usage, but he was first and last the chronicler of pugilism." ■

***Patrick Myler, a freelance writer based in Dublin, Ireland, is the author of several boxing books, including* Gentleman Jim Corbett: The Truth Behind A Boxing Legend.**

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