

IBRO

INTERNATIONAL BOXING RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

THE STRANGE CASE OF WILLIAM GAVIN AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN BOXING

William A.J. Gavin was born in Yorkshire, England in 1865. He died in London, aged 82, in January, 1948.

His obituary, sent over the wire by Reuters, described him as a "well known figure in English journalism." Gavin was proprietor and managing director of *Vanity Fair* from 1899 to 1908 and was president of the Gavin-Armour Steel Corporation of America from 1915 to 1922.

It was while heading Gavin-Armour that he founded modern boxing.

What is meant by "modern boxing?" Bare knuckle brawling, under the London Prize Ring Rules, where rounds ended only with knockdowns (or wrestling "throws"), had nearly always been illegal. The Marquess of Queensberry Rules, which called for gloves and three-minute rounds, were given quite a bit more leeway by the law, but never put the sport on a firm legal basis. States legalized boxing, outlawed it, allowed allegedly private "club" membership boxing, disallowed it, and frequently prohibited official verdicts in order to discourage gambling. Boxing was, in short, a quasi-legal sport at the time of World War I.

In November, 1917, with America in the war and European soldiers dug into trenches around Germany and France, the Frawley Law, which had permitted 10-round "no decision" bouts in New York since July, 1911, was repealed.

Enter William Gavin. A sportsman all his life (he is said to have crossed Norway in a balloon with the explorer, Fridtjof Nansen, in 1897) with a deep passion for boxing, he had the idea of starting an American body built along the lines of England's National Sporting Club, a combination venue, promotional, title sanctioning, and rules making body that had virtually governed British boxing since the 1890s. Gavin reasoned that such a body would be legal in New York because the law could certainly not outlaw boxing within the precincts of a private—or ostensibly private—club.

He reasoned wrong. In February, 1918, three months after the repeal of the Frawley Law, *The People vs. Packey O'Gatty* ruled out "club membership" boxing in New York. Gavin was dismayed but not defeated. He now put his energies toward re-legalizing boxing in New York, his efforts finally resulting in the passage of the so-called Walker Law in 1920. Boxing in New York was back.

Gavin, it appeared, thought New York was like London. Nor did

he fathom the free spirit of the coming "Roaring Twenties." George (Tex) Rickard seized the opportunity and took a lease on Madison Square Garden, then at 26th Street and Madison Avenue. This was the only indoor venue in New York capable of holding the crowds that now would flock to see the likes of Benny Leonard, Jack Dempsey, Jack Britton, Pete Herman, and other great world champs defend their titles. The idea of a small private club supported by the rich seemed downright foolish in comparison. Nor would boxers or their managers opt for the "prestige" of fighting before names like Vanderbilt and Astor in the way that English boxers fought before the aristocracy (for prestigious British Championship Challenge Belts donated by Lord Lonsdale) in London's N.S.C. (In fact, the National Sporting Club's own power waned throughout the 1920s, as more commercial promoters caught the spirit of the times, leased larger venues, and offered higher purses than the N.S.C. could muster.)

But William Gavin was not through contributing to boxing. In the fall of 1920, as the first boxing show under the new "Walker Law" was being held in M.S.G., he made plans for a National Boxing Association of America. Representatives from 17 commissions—many of them new and modeled on the Walker Law—gathered in the offices of Gavin's International Boxing Club in New York's Flatiron Building for three days beginning January 10, 1921, with Gavin himself chairing. Only New York and Massachusetts (which later changed its mind) refused to join the NBA, New York claiming it would lose its sovereignty and therefore not be able to discharge the duties it was charged with by the Walker Law. A clause was inserted into the new NBA By-Laws before the end of the convention, specifying that its rules would only be enforceable to the extent that they did not interfere with the constitutions of state commissions. It made no difference to New York, which simply thought that it would serve its own best interests by going its own powerful way.

Gavin threw in the towel at the end of '21. His International Sporting Club, which never really left the planning stage, was buried and forgotten, and W.A.J. Gavin returned to the steel business. It was he, however, who was the original driving force and idea man behind what became the Walker Law, establishing the commission which has served as a model for similar commissions in the U.S. and around the world. Boxing has been firmly established as a legal sport and entity throughout the U.S. ever since. (There is no need, of course, to emphasize the role that the United States has played in boxing since the early '20s.) Gavin's National Boxing Association was the first powerful association of commissions in the U.S., and forerunner of the present World Boxing Association, first of the world sanctioning bodies which now govern the sport.

Gavin's thoughts were pure, but he could not fathom the selfish political interests which became part of the newly formed New York State Athletic Commission. The winners always get to write the histories, so James J. Walker and Tex Rickard have come down as the fathers of modern boxing. Gavin has been swept under the carpet, or dismissed as someone who raised money for his Int. Sporting Club, used that money to pay graft to politicians in order to get the Walker Law past the New York State legislature, and coolly sailed home when he ran short of cash. That he paid to have the Walker Law passed by the politicians of the time is almost indisputable. To say that he simply sailed home when the money was gone, however, is a gross oversimplification—an attempt to demean the contributions of an essentially honest man while boosting the stocks of powerful home grown New York interests and powers. (Gavin, in fact, resigned as managing director of the I.S.C. on November 7, 1921.)

It is not, we think, too late for justice to be done. The full story of William A.J. Gavin, the Army, Navy and Civilian Board of Boxing Control, the Walker Law, the I.S.C., and the National Boxing Association has not yet been told. Enough has been learned, however, to allow us to name Gavin as the father of what has been called the modern sport—and business—of boxing.