



Gypsy Jem Mace: Being One Man's Search for His Forgotten Famous Ancestor

Jeremy Poolman

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A few miles from New Orleans stands a life-size bronze statue of two men in combat. One of them is the legendary Gypsy Jem Mace, the first Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World and the last of the great bare-knuckle fighters. Between his first fight, in October 1855, and his last at the age of nearly 60, he took the sport from the brutal bloody backstreets and inn courtyards to a world stage, and became the greatest fighter the world has ever known. He was a giant of the ring—his very first title fight, for the Heavyweight Championship of England, lasted 43 rounds, half of which he fought with a broken arm. More than a boxer, within the span of one life he seemed to live a dozen lives, and they're all detailed here. In his youth he scratched a living playing the fiddle on a filthy coal steamer, yet he later owned and ran a bar and restaurant in New York so swanky that even today the current owners talk about “that great Englishman” as if he had only just left the building. He was an acquaintance of Charles Dickens, and became a friend of Wyatt Earp, who even refereed one of his bouts. In Australia he fought an exhibition match in a silver mine was presented by the miners with a silver brick inscribed “This is a brick and you are another.” And in 1870 in New Orleans he fought for and won the Heavyweight Championship of the World—the first championship fight ever to be fought in the U. S. Not simply about boxing, Gypsy Jem Mace is about the rise—and its cost—of a great man from nothing.

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