

THE BLACK BOXER & THE SCOTTISH CRAFT

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In my youth and early twenties, I had a great interest in the pugilistic art of self defence, boxing. Now, boxing in Edinburgh in the latter part of the forties and the early fifties was a very popular sport. Professional bouts were held every two weeks at the Assembly Rooms in George Street, just along the street from Grand Lodge, and amateur bouts at various venues in the city were more frequent. To my knowledge Glasgow and Dundee were also well to the fore. Nowadays, in my opinion the sport is very much devalued, for example, where there used to be eight World Championship belts there are now more than 80. That fine boxer Henry “*Hank*” Armstrong, the only man to hold three titles simultaneously in his day, could be considered to have held the equivalent of 20 modern day titles.

The only way to decide who is “*top dog*” at any weight nowadays is to trace forward from the last recognised unified World Champion and follow a line of “*the man who beat, the man who beat*”. In 1949 Joe Louis retired as undefeated heavyweight champion. Then Ezzard Charles beat “*Jersey*” Joe Walcott. This fight was not recognised by the New York authorities. Joe Louis was persuaded to come out of retirement in an attempt to unify the Championship and lost to Ezzard. In my opinion that was the start of the proliferation of bodies. We now have five bodies, and 17 weights, and I hear there is every possibility of a sixth starting soon. This situation cannot be good for boxing.

I used to train in a basement gym in Edinburgh. Around the walls we had the usual pictures of former Champions, Joe Louis “*The Brown Bomber*”, Jack Dempsey the “*Manasseh Mauler*”, “*Gentleman Jim*” Corbett, Jack Johnson, “*Sugar Ray*” Robinson, Freddy Mills, the Welshman “*Gentleman Jim*” Jeffries, (an autographed copy). There was Archie Moore who fought in excess of 500 bouts in his career but no one knew his age and Maxie Baer, known as the “*Clown Prince*”, later to appear in many Hollywood films. Baer’s brother Buddy appeared in the movie *Quo Vadis*

where he fought a bull in the arena whilst protecting Deborah Kerr, that well known English beauty, who I believe came from Greenock. Local talent was represented by Benny Lynch, who was pound for pound in, my opinion, the best booth fighter who ever lived. He had the heart of a lion and would fight anyone. Jackie Paterson, our longest reigning world Champion carried a heavy punch far above his weight. We have had other Champions since, like Walter McGowan, who was trained by his father, Joe Gans; Ken Buchanan from Edinburgh's Northfield Drive, he only fought one fight in Scotland, and Jim Watt who is still a celebrity in Scottish boxing and is now a commentator and pundit. Our latest, last year, is Scott Harrison. To return to our story and give you an idea of the trials and tribulations of a boxer back in the early 1900's, let's take a closer look at one of these fighters, Jack Johnson.

John Arthur Johnson was the son of former slaves, second in a family of six. Born in Galveston Texas in 1878, he was highly intelligent but had little education. He left school at age 11 to start work, to help maintain his family. He learned his boxing in the "*Battle Royal*". A number of white men would put up a few dollars as a purse, then up to a dozen Negro fighters would get into a boxing ring and the last man standing would get the purse. That was a Battle Royal. Jack usually won.

Johnson turned pro in 1894 at the age of sixteen in Galveston, with a win over John Lee in 16 rounds. In 1904 after 3 pro fights he beat Denver Ed Martin in Los Angeles over 20 rounds to become the coloured heavy weight Champion of the world. His attempts to fight for the World title were obstructed because no white man would fight him. However, he kept plugging away and eventually the fights came. One of these was against Bob Fitzsimmons, "*The Cornish Bantam*" former heavy, light heavy and middleweight World Champion (not all at the same time).

In 1905 Champion Jim Jeffries, who had avoided Jack Johnson by stating that "*he would not degrade himself or boxing by fighting a Negro*", retired. The bout between Marvin Hart and Jack Root refereed by Jim Jeffries himself was considered to be for the Championship. Hart won and in the following year lost to Canadian Tommy Burns. Burns who had beaten all comers in the States went to Australia to further his career. Jack Johnson continued fighting and winning and 1908 saw him in Plymouth England for a couple of bouts. Hearing Burns was in Australia, Jack

Johnson sailed there, and in Sydney on December 26th he won the title. The police stopped the fighting in round 14 to save Burns any further damage. Jack Johnson winning the heavyweight Championship of the World led to race riots and great consternation among white Americans, especially in the Southern States. Some people even suggested that the authorities should prevent this from being acknowledged.

There followed the era of “*the great white hopes*” who attempted to take the title from him. Among them was Victor Maclagan the long-time friend of John Wayne. In 1909 Johnson fought Frank Moran, Jack O'Brien, Tony Ross, Al Koffman, and Middleweight Champion Stanley Ketchel, none were successful.

His private life was also causing some problems. His penchant for white women offended against a white American taboo. The author Jack London at that time a reporter for the New York Herald wrote ‘*But one thing now remains. Jim Jeffries must now emerge from his alfalfa farm and remove that golden smile from Jack Johnson’s face. Jeff it’s up to you. The white man must be rescued*’. In 1910 Jim Jeffries was persuaded to come out of retirement and attempt to regain the championship belt but his corner “*threw in the towel*” in the 15th round.

Once again race riots broke out; white gangs rampaged through the black districts of various towns and cities. A considerable number of people were killed, predominately black people. All of the United States banned the showing of newsreels of the Johnson - Jeffries fight. 1911 saw him defending his title in London against “*Bombardier*” Billy Wells. Johnson won on points.

In 1912 the government stepped in. Firstly, he was heavily fined on a smuggling charge. Then Johnson was arrested in connection with one of his marriages and convicted for offences under the Mann act (transporting women over state boundaries for the purpose of prostitution). He was sentenced to one year and one day in the penitentiary and fined \$1000.

Whilst free, pending an appeal, before his final sentence was declared, Johnson made a rapid exit and turned up in France. In France he had five fights, the last a title fight against Frank Moran. He won them all.

He then moved on to Cuba where in 1915 he lost the title to Jess Willard, the 6' 6" Iowa farm boy, by a knockout in the 26th round. Some reporters say that Johnson threw the fight because of an agreement with the US authorities. It was said that if he threw the fight they would allow him to return for his mother's funeral. I really don't know the truth of this matter. Johnson continued fighting in England, Spain, Mexico and South America until, in 1920, the Mexican authorities forced him out. On crossing the border he was met by US Marshall George Cooley, FBI Special Agent Dave Gershon and a crowd of reporters and photographers. They posed for pictures and Johnson spoke with the reporters.

Jailed in Los Angeles he was transferred to Leavenworth, where he was greeted by a crowd of 500 people. Whilst in prison he fought six fights before large crowds. The bouts were filmed and shown in newsreels. When released Johnson continued boxing at a very low level and on September 1st 1938 after losing to Walter Price in the seventh round in Boston, he retired. He was sixty years of age. Later he appeared in a few exhibition fights, to promote war bonds.

He died in 1948 in a car crash. He was inducted into the Boxing Hall of Fame in 1954. In addition to being a boxer Johnson was also an inventor. One of his patents "*the adjustable spanner*" is still in use to this day.

Well! By now you're all wondering what this has to do with Freemasonry. On the 13th October 1911 John Arthur Johnson was initiated in Lodge Forfar and Kincardine 225 in Dundee (F&K).

The circumstances were as follows. Johnson was touring the Music Halls in England putting on exhibitions of boxing. He met a young Scots mason and after several conversations with him he indicated that he also would like to be a mason. The young man sent a telegram to the Right Worshipful Master of 225 with this request. The RWM replied that this could be arranged.

Then the trouble started! Someone who disagreed with the idea, and there were many in the Lodge who did, telegraphed someone in the States. The news went

round the Masonic fraternity in the USA like wildfire. Nearly every Grand Lodge in the USA objected strongly. Indeed, most threatened to withdraw their representative from the Grand Lodge of Scotland.

Lodge F&K advertised the initiation meeting to take place on Saturday 13th at 12 noon. Grand Lodge sent a telegram to the Provincial Grand Lodge of Forfarshire ordering them to stop the initiation pending further enquiries. However, as several members of the Lodge had indicated that they would use the black ball. The RWM brought the meeting forward to 10 am and sent round transport to pick up all those who had agreed, thereby excluding all those who had disagreed. When Provincial Grand Secretary arrived at the Hall the deed had already been done and Johnson was back on the train and on his way to Newcastle.

If the RWM of 225 thought that his troubles were over he had another think coming. The situation became even worse with the event reported both here and in the USA. Grand Lodge ordered the PGL to hold an inquiry and report back.

A reporter employed by the Dundee Advertiser called on Johnson in Leeds and the meeting was reported in the paper on the 30th October as follows.

JJ the famous pugilist says he is not to take any part in the squabble that has arisen over his nomination and initiation as a member of the Dundee Masonic Lodge F&K, but he adds that he is proud to belong to the craft. He says he is not concerned as to the circumstances attending his nomination, as to how the meeting of the Lodge was called, what notice was given to the brethren; what enquiry was made into his character and qualifications; who was his proposer and seconder; whether the knew him personally and so forth. However, Johnson lapsed into silence. He later stated "I'll talk to you on anything else you like but I don't want to say nothing at all about that. It's simply a jealous story you're apt to find in anything. I don't want to say nothing because I don't want anybody to think I am unworthy of certain things. All I want is fair treatment, and I don't want nothing bestowed on me I don't deserve, if there is anything to say well it's for the Lodge and other people. I'm all right." "But there is no doubt about it you are a Mason?" remarked our representative. "Oh certainly" rolled out the champion confidently, "They can't say anything

about me". He denied that there was any "squabble" and refused to say anything further on that point. "You have a high opinion of Freemasonry then" he was asked. Johnson's face lit up with enthusiasm, "It's the greatest thing in the world it's wonderful" he said glowingly. "I have always wanted to be a member and I chose the Dundee Lodge because it is one of the oldest and one of the most substantial." "You are proud then at being a Freemason?" "I am proud I can tell you" he remarked. "I am a Freemason and as long as I live I shall be one. Only God almighty can undo that". Johnson concluded by emphatically stating that he would certainly go back to Dundee to have his second degree conferred some time in early December.

In Arbroath where Freemasonry is strong the case of JJ aroused much interest amongst the members of the craft. Varying opinions were to be heard. Strong advocates were to be heard in favour of Johnson's admission to the Order on the grounds that there was nothing in the Constitution & Laws barring a black man from initiation. *"We are a brotherhood"* remarked one prominent Freemason *"and I fail to see why from the fact that he is a black man, why Johnson should be debarred from proceeding further in the Order. I don't care that I am in the minority I say let him receive his remaining degrees."* Another well known Member of the craft remarked *"F&K Lodge may have acted indiscreetly - we don't know yet that they have - but in any case now that they have initiated Johnson they should allow him to go through"*. A local Past Master expressed himself favourable to Johnson's initiation with the remark, *"I know the feeling against him, and as a true and loyal Mason of many years standing I would say let brotherly love continue black or white."*

A debate commenced regarding whether it was easier to become a Mason in Dundee than elsewhere. A *Dundee Advertiser* reporter had talks with several members of the craft in Dundee and although their disposition was to say very little about the Johnson case to a non-mason, the reporter was able to discover a considerable amount about Masonry in general in the City. One mason who once held office in a city Lodge, on being asked if it were the case that it was easier to become a Mason in Dundee than in any other part of the UK, said he was not prepared to go as far as admitting that that was the case but he significantly remarked that there were one or two Lodges in which the enquiry was not exercised. He mentioned the case of a

Roman Catholic who approached the RWM of a Dundee Lodge and made a request for membership. The RWM pointed out to him that a Roman Catholic who had to appear at the Confessional could not, or at least should not, be a Freemason. Disappointed at this reaction, he left the RWM without saying anything further but in the course of the next few days, he was admitted to another Lodge. The Mason interviewed further stated that in Johnson's case an irregularity had been committed in advertising the initiation ceremony for a certain hour and afterwards altering it to an earlier hour, thus preventing members of the Lodge, except those specially informed of the change, from exercising their right to say whether the candidate should be admitted. Three objectors would have been fatal to Johnson's chances and he understood that there were more than that number who, now at least, were prepared to blackball him on the grounds that Johnson was not personally known to a sufficient number of the members and that they had no information as to the religion he confessed. Another Mason asked if he could see any reason why Johnson had put himself to the trouble and expense of travelling all the way from Newcastle to Dundee to become a Mason, replied that he could not. However, there were, he said, plenty of Masonic Lodges in England but £15 was the cost of initiation down there and it was very much less in Dundee. He believed that there was something in the allegation that membership was more easily secured in Dundee than in the majority of places, easier in respect that the enquiries regarding the individual asking for entry to the craft were not so searching. He thought that whatever the result of the investigation, ordered by the Grand Lodge, might be in this particular case it was bound to be good for the craft in general.

Another RWM said that F&K acted both injudiciously and with undue haste and that *“whilst there is nothing in Masonry against the admission of coloured Masons, there is undoubtedly provision for a searching inquiry into the character of an individual before admission. Johnson is an American. Why did he not make application to a Lodge in his native country? He has been long enough in England and there are Dramatic and Music Hall Artists Lodges in various parts of England, why did he not apply there? I hope some good will come of this. I would have an applicants name lying on the table for one month prior to being sent for. I would have no aliens initiated into the Order”*.

On February 1st 1912, at the Grand Lodge quarterly with the Marquis of Tulibardine, Grand Master Mason, presiding a law was passed forbidding members from taking part in such discussions. Still the furore continued. On the 24th April, at the Provincial Grand Lodge quarterly, a letter from Grand Lodge Committee was read requiring that Lodge 225 should be suspended until December 15th 1913, that the RWM should be suspended for two years and three Past Masters for one year. A furious discussion took place, many members complaining of the harshness of the treatment of the Lodge. The sentence deprived many members who had not participated in the event. One Brother stated that it was “*disgraceful that racial hatred had been at the bottom of it all*”, this was strongly denied by the Provincial Grand Master. Another Brother stated that the case had “*not been judged according to its merits and demerits*”. Yet another Brother stated that “*it is a painful crisis if the Grand Lodge of Scotland is to bow the knee and act according to the dictates of the American Constitution.*” After further talk the discussion was decreed irregular.

At Grand Lodge quarterly of May 3rd 1912 one member asked who had leaked the results of Grand Committee’s resolutions to the press ten days before members were informed. The acting Grand Master replied that this “*was a conundrum which defeated*” him.

The August meeting of Grand Lodge heard the appeals of the Lodge and individuals. The Lodge was represented by Mr. Will C. Smith KC, and Bro W.T. Watson advocate spoke for the individuals. The Grand Master Mason ruled that no question of colour was to be admitted. Two items were considered separately. The suspension of the Lodge was passed by an overwhelming show of hands. The suspension of the individuals was unanimous. Jack Johnson had his fees returned and all reference to him being an Entered Apprentice removed.

This was the end of a painful experience for Scottish Freemasonry. As we all know, the situation could not happen now. Were the members of Grand Lodge morally correct in what they did? From this distance in time my instinctive feeling is that the Lodge was hard done by and that the individuals concerned were let off lightly. However, we don't know the pressure that was in all probability being applied to the Grand Master Mason. He was, after all, a Member of Parliament and constantly

in London. Were the protests from America a colour problem? I suggest that without doubt they were. Subsequent events however, appear to indicate that Johnson may not have been considered a suitable person for Freemasonry.

I have deliberately not used information from Grand Lodge quarterly communications or official Lodge 225 letters. All the information I have used, I have obtained from the public domain.