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Original Citation

Litherland, Benjamin (2016) The Bruising Business: Pugilism, Commercial Culture, and Celebrity, 1700 – 1750. In: Sports and Physical Exercise in Early Modern Culture: New Perspectives on the History of Sports and Motion. Routledge, pp. 109-124. ISBN 9781472411945

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The Bruising Business: Pugilism, Commercial Culture, and Celebrity, 1700 - 1750

Benjamin Litherland

Of all the early modern sports prize-fighting has likely received the most attention from historians. Numerous writers have explored boxing's roots¹, and the sport's most successful performers during the eighteenth century – James Figg, Jack Broughton, Daniel Mendoza, amongst others – are names that consistently reappear throughout these texts. There are, perhaps, several reasons for this attention: prize-fighting is one of the earliest examples of a fully commercialised sport with professionalised performers, and these performers used the newspapers to spread their name to a large audience, wittingly or unwittingly helping future historians to spread their name further. In particular, Egan's *Boxiana* volumes, an early example of popular sport reporting, published during the regency period, while also fictionalising exciting details here and exaggerated feats and achievements there. For these reasons, compared to the sources for, say, fifteenth century Cumbrian wrestling, the archives surrounding eighteenth century prize-fighting can seem deceptively abundant. Indeed, this may account for the relatively large coverage permitted and the detailed understandings of the sport we currently have. Primarily, central to many such accounts are newspaper advertisements, followed by a limited number of newspaper reports, followed by scattered diary accounts, pamphlets, poems, and trading cards. Moreover, by the end of the century further printed material – training manuals², a dedicated sporting press, and early forms

¹ See Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History*, (London, 2008); Dennis Brailsford, 'Morals and Maulers: The Ethics of Early Pugilism', *Journal of Sport History*, 12/2, (1985): pp.126-142; Dennis Brailsford, *Bareknuckles: A Social History of Prize-Fighting*, (Cambridge, 1988); Peter M. Briggs 'Daniel Mendoza and Sporting Celebrity: A Case Study', in Tom Mole (ed.); *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750 – 1850* (Cambridge, 2009); John Ford *Prizefighting: The Age of Regency Boximania* (Devon, 1971); Kenneth Gordon Sheard, *Boxing in the Civilising Process* (Cambridge, 1992); Vanessa Toulmin, *A Fair Fight: An Illustrated Review of Boxing on British Fairgrounds* (Oldham, 1999); John Whale, 'Daniel Mendoza's Contests of Identity: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Nation in Georgian Prize-Fighting', *Romanticism*, 14/3 (2008): pp.259 – 271

² See Dave Day, "'Science", "Wind" and "Bottom": Eighteenth-Century Boxing Manuals', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29/10, (2012) and all Dave Day's contribution to this volume.

celebrity autobiographies³ – would further aid our knowledge of the sport's contexts and evolution.

The impressive and painstaking archive work undertaken by others has allowed us to build an understanding of the matches fought, between whom and the socio-economic backgrounds of the pugilists involved; we are able to trace the changing nature of the fights, seeing weapons replaced by fists; and we can describe the price of entry and speculate on the class and gender of audiences. Yet for all the details we now have about these fighters, one cannot escape the feeling that often these stories are constructed from sources that were part of the promotional culture that surrounded the sport. The purpose of this chapter, then, is not to speculate on a fighter's heroism, skill or the manner of victories. What is of concern, however, is the promotional culture itself. Just as a history of advertising's role is not to test the truthfulness of a brand's claims but instead to reflect on the social and cultural milieu that produces these texts, the purpose of this chapter is not to dispel myths but rather to explore the manner in which they constructed, distributed and disseminated. How did fighting shown alongside animal baiting develop into a popular, professionalised and commercialised sport? What changes were taking place at the turn of the century to allow prize-fighters to become the sporting *celebrities* of their day?

Peter Burke, in his classic study of early modern popular culture, has argued that 'a new type of popular hero made his appearance in the eighteenth century: the sports idol'⁴. Burke's choice of word is revealing, and his hesitance in using the word celebrity is understandable – it is a term loaded with cultural meanings that differ over time. The

³ See Matthew Taylor, 'From Source to Subject: Sport, History and Autobiography', *Journal of Sport History*, 35/3 (2008): pp. 469-491.

⁴ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Burlington, 2006): p.249

phrase may seem explicitly modern, but it is the purpose of this chapter to argue that the prize-fighters of the day were exactly that. Over the past decade we have seen a growing body of literature that places celebrity culture's roots in the eighteenth century⁵. Tracking the shift from the bear gardens of London to the dedicated boxing amphitheatres, I think, offers an illuminating case study in celebrity's history. We see advertising and newspapers spread the name of individuals across the country; developments in the manner in which individuals are sold, becoming marketable products in the growing consumer culture. The aim of this chapter is to place pugilism and its promotion into the wider social, cultural and economic context of the early eighteenth century and highlight the changes that would result in our modern understanding of celebrity.

BEAR GARDENS

The bear gardens of London were a feature of London entertainment for much of the early modern period. Like animal baiting throughout England, in the towns and at the country fairs, the bear garden remained an immensely popular diversion for the public throughout the early modern period and audiences were drawn from all the classes⁶ with pricing structures to reflect social standing⁷. The bear gardens were commercial, popular and an important aspect of quotidian London life that were rooted in the

⁵ Elizabeth Barry, 'From Epitaph to Obituary: Death and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century British Culture' *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11/3 (2008): pp.259-275; Fred Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*, (Princeton, 2010); Tom Mole, *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture*, (Cambridge, 2009); Simon Morgan, 'Celebrity: Academic "Pseudo-Event" or a Useful Concept for Historians?', *Cultural and Social History*, 8/1 (2011); Stella Tillyard, 'Celebrity in 18th-Century London' *History Today* 55/6 (2005): Available at www.historytoday.com/stella-tillyard/celebrity-18th-century-london.

⁶ Tobias Hug, "'You Should go to Hockley in the Hole, and to Marybone, Child, to Learn Valour": On the Social Logic of Animal Baiting in Early Modern London', *Renaissance Journal*, 2/1 (2004) Allen Guttmann 'English Sports Spectators: The Restoration to the Early Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Sport History*, 12/2 (1985) p. 115.

⁷ George A. Aitken (London, 1899) *The Tatler Volume 1* London: Duckworth and Company p. 132; Thomas S. Henricks, 'The Democratization of Sport in Eighteenth-Century England', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 18/3 (1984): p.14.

‘communal ritual of rural entertainments’⁸. At the venues, as the name suggests, one would encounter bear baiting, as well as other animal baiting, including monkeys, bulls, leopard and lions. In addition to animals, men would also perform at the venue, sometimes as supplementary entertainment and at other times as the main attraction. It is difficult to ascertain who owned and directly profited from the venues, but considering audiences would likely have been well-provided with alcohol and that the immediate local publicans would have enjoyed rampant trade on the days of performances, it might not be too wild to speculate that the ‘theatre’ was owned and operated by one (or more) closely linked to the alcohol trade.

How much the pugilists were likely to earn also remains questionable. Prizes were often rewarded to winning competitors, yet such rewards were small, and competitors seemed to have retained jobs in ‘everyday’ employment. Thus, fighters earned much of their profits from aristocratic stake money⁹ or, in a similar manner to the travelling showmen of the period, from collections made by the audience at the end of the fight¹⁰. Because they were reliant on the collection pugilists were inclined to provide as much of an entertainment as possible. *The London Post*’s report of a fight at the turn of the century describes in great detail the drama of the event:

Terrewest received only one wound, but Heskate 5 or 6, so that he lost the day. Whilst they were a fighting, Davis, commonly known by the name of the Champion of the west, got upon the stage, and refused to go off again, challenging Terrewest, to fight him for offering to put him off, and afterwards challenged to fight any man there, whereupon one Gorman...Jumped upon the Stage, and proffered to take up this bold challenger, and accordingly they both stript, and went to it, and at first bout Gorman wounded the Champion in the throat, and at second bout received a wound himself, in the side, but gave the Champion so great a wound on his forehead, that he swooned

⁸ Erica Louise Fudge, *The Context of Bear-Baiting in Early Modern England* (Sussex: 1995), p.158.

⁹ Ford, *Prizefighting*, p.90; Guttmann, *English Sports Spectators*, p.117.

¹⁰ Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, (July 21, 1712).

away; and many thought he had been killed, however he was so far disabled, that he could not try the third bout.¹¹

Perhaps what is most striking about this description is the brutality and bloodiness of the fight. The combatants were to fight with a range of weapons that had the potential to cause death or serious injury. An advertisement taken from a newspaper in 1699 lists the tools with which the fighters would duel: ‘Back-Sword, Sword and Dagger, Sword and Buckler, Single Falchon..., Quarter-Staff’¹².

As well as the thrill of the blood, violence and competition the fights between men offered a taste of the theatrical: colour, costume, music and drama would all be used to present an exciting and engaging, and hopefully profitable, performance to the cheering crowds. Steele, a playwright tasked by George I in 1714 with reforming the London stage, was particularly qualified to comment on the theatrical. His description in the *Spectator* of a visit to the Bear Garden at Hockley is permeated with dramatic codes and conventions.

James Miller came on first, preceded by two disabled Drummers, to show, I suppose, that the prospect of maimed Bodies did not in the least deter him...It is not easy to describe the many Escapes and imperceptible Defences between the two...but Millar’s Heat laid him open to the Rebuke of the calm Buck, by a large cut on the forehead. Much Effusion of Blood covered his eyes in a moment, and the Huzzahs of the crowd undoubtedly quickened the anguish...The Wound was exposed to the View of all who could delight in it, and sowed up on the stage. The surly Second of Millar declared at this time, that he would that Day Fornight fight Mr. Buck at the same Weapons.¹³

Millar’s confrontation and the promise of a fight in the futures indicates a form of promotion that boxers and professional wrestlers would draw on when using published advertisements. Other forms of promotion were used, too: on the day of performances

¹¹ *London Post*, (17th July, 1700)

¹² Classified advertisement, *Post Boy* (October 21, 1699).

¹³ Steele, *The Spectator*, p.2.

there would be a procession through the surrounding area, much to the annoyance of some local residents. Their irritation has left us with a vivid description: in 1701 presentment of the grand jury in Middlesex described what preceded these performances:

We having observed the late boldness of a sort of men that stile themselves masters of the noble science of defence, passing through this city with beat of drums, colours displayed, swords drawn, with a numerous company of people following them, dispersing their printed bills, thereby inviting persons to be spectators of those inhuman sights which are directly contrary to the practice and profession of the Christian religion....we think ourselves obliged to represent this matter, that some method may be speedily taken to prevent their passage through the city in such a tumultuous manner, on so unwarrantable a design.¹⁴

Such processions were clearly designed to garner attention and attract audiences, but within this form of promotion there is something resembling the carnival, and it certainly seems to be a form of promotion that supported the communal and ritual aspects of the cultural form. Such forms of promotion, though, would soon be displaced by a more wide-reaching form of communication. Processions, after all, could only attract those within the immediate vicinity; the blossoming newspaper business, however, had influence across the whole city, and in some cases country, and it was this business that would transform how pugilism presented and promoted itself.

COMMERCE

Before analysing the relationship between pugilism and advertising in greater detail I want to sketch the social and economic changes that were taking place in London and England in the first half of the eighteenth century. In short, this is the beginnings of a

¹⁴ Quoted in James Pellar Malcolm, *Anecdotes of the Manners and Customs of London During the Eighteenth Century*, (London, 1810): p.112

consumer, commodity and commercial society¹⁵. It is in this context that we should understand changes pugilism, sport and popular culture.

For the latter half of the seventeenth century, then, London was witnessing intense social economic and political change. London had undergone unprecedented population growth, swelling from 400,000 in 1650 to around 575,000 by 1700¹⁶. This growth saw rural amusements adapted to the urban setting¹⁷ and pre-existing amusements of the city further commercialised for wider audiences. Similarly, accompanying this population growth were changes in consumer habits. For the vast majority of skilled labourers and apprentices, and for an increasing number of unskilled workers, London and the south of England enjoyed higher living standards than anywhere in the country; they existed in a ‘high wage economy’¹⁸ and thus ‘enjoyed greater purchasing power’¹⁹. Improvements in wages allowed for an increasing number of commodities to be bought with surplus money after basic needs had been met²⁰. Inventories of the poor find an ever growing number of commercial products²¹, and ‘cloth, ceramics, glassware, paper, cutlery,’ T.H. Breen argues, ‘transformed the character of everyday life [and] the domestic market hummed with activity’²². Changes in levels of consumption would be matched by changes in distribution, with

¹⁵ The most influential of these studies remains Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England* (London, 1982). See also Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Oxford, 2005); Cissie Fairchilds, ‘Consumption in Early Modern Europe: A Review Article’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35/4 (1993):pp.850-853; Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth Century England*, (London, 1989)

¹⁶ E. Anthony Wrigley, ‘A Simple Model of London’s Importance in Changing English Society and Economy’, *Past & Present*, 37 (1967): p.44.

¹⁷ Michael Harris, ‘Sport in Newspapers Before 1750: Representations of Cricket, Class and Commerce in the London Press’, *Media History*, 4/1 (1998): p.24.

¹⁸ Robert C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cambridge, 2009): p.45.

¹⁹ Francis Sheppard, *London: A History* (Oxford, 2006): p.225.

²⁰ McKendrick, *Consumer Society*, p.24

²¹ John Mullan and Christopher Reid *Eighteenth-Century Popular Culture: A Selection* (Oxford, 2000): p. 19. Roy Porter, ‘English Society in the Eighteenth Century Revisited’ in Jeremy Black (ed.); *British Politics and Society From Walpole to Pitt 1742 – 1789* (Basingstoke, 1990): p.39

²² T. H. Breen “‘Baubles of Britain’”: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century’, *Past & Present*, 119 (1988): p.7

proliferating shops becoming a regular feature of London life, competing and increasingly overtaking the importance of the market and fair²³.

At the heart of this consumer society was the burgeoning press. Newspapers were indicative of increased spending power and higher wages²⁴, and the advertisements they contained encouraged and maintained the material and commercial culture that was developing around them. By the end of the seventeenth century, the number of newspapers being produced had mushroomed, and it was during this time that the newspaper recognisable to its modern equivalents in its 'functions and forms'²⁵. Encouraged by the lapsed and deficient Licensing (Printing) Act in 1695, and with continued failure to establish a replacement in 1697, 1698, 1702, 1704 and 1712, investors were coming to realise that newspapers offered profitable business²⁶. The late seventeenth century saw a host of London papers, published weekly or thrice weekly, which were available in London and increasingly in the provinces. Shortly after in 1702 the *Daily Courant* was launched as the first daily newspaper²⁷. This surge was quickly followed by an ever increasing number of daily papers. With such a competitive and relatively unstable market place, publishers were realising that advertising could provide additional and welcome revenue to offset printing and distribution costs²⁸. Advertisements for an ever-growing number of commercial products could be found in newspapers, and this in turn was changing how commercial products were presented to

²³ Dorothy Davies, *A History of Shopping* (London, 1966): p. 181; Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*; Wrigley, *A Simple Model*, p. 51; Breen, *Baubles of Britain*, p.77.

²⁴ Jean-Christophe Agnew, 'Coming up for Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective', in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds); *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1994): p. 24

²⁵ Mullan and Reid, *Popular Culture*, p. 22

²⁶ Jeremy Black, *The English Press: 1621 – 1861* (Stroud, 2001): p. 8

²⁷ J.H. Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth-Century England* (Reading, 1974): p.6.

²⁸ Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, p. 222; J.M. Price, 'A Note on the Circulation of the London Press, 1704 - 1714', *Historical Research*, 31/84 (1958): p.218

the public. The advertisement was crystallising around exaggeration, hyperbole and puffery²⁹.

This commercial culture would also have profound effects on leisure and culture. As argued by E. P. Thompson³⁰, developments in economic structures saw a shift from a participatory festival and agricultural culture to a commercial culture which demonstrated sharper divisions between work and leisure. Those employed now saw a more dramatic distinction between 'their employer's time and their "own" time'³¹. When the nature of work and leisure came to be defined by time-keeping and time-pieces, employers became stricter: the 'employer must *use* the time of his labour and see it is not wasted: not the task but the value of time when reduced to money is dominant'³².

Peter Burke, building on this argument, posits that traditional rhythms of agricultural life which gave birth to the festival and carnival culture gradually morphed to 'regular doses of daily or weekly recreation'³³. This, he suggests, resulted in a growing commercialisation of leisure which reflected that of wider culture³⁴. Here I concur with Joan-Lluís Marfany's rebut that it is hard to entertain the notion that pre-industrial societies struggled to tell the difference between work and leisure³⁵, and that a commercialisation of leisure extends into the early modern period (not least in the bear gardens). However, by the 1720s and 30s London demonstrates a shifting attitude towards leisure which moves it away from localised, semi-rural and communal

²⁹ McKendrick, *Consumer Society*, p.148 -149.

³⁰ E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past & Present*, 38/1 (1967): pp.56-97.

³¹ Thompson, *Time Work-Discipline*, p. 61.

³² Thompson, *Time Work-Discipline*, p. 61.

³³ Peter Burke, 'The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe', *Past & Present*, 14/1 (1995): p.148.

³⁴ Burke, *Invention of Leisure*, p.148.

³⁵ Joan-Lluís Marfany, 'Debate: The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe', *Past & Present*, 156/1 (1997): p.179

pleasures to an increasingly urbanised³⁶, national, professionalised, institutionalised³⁷, and profitable commodity sold in an increasingly competitive commercial marketplace.

The shift from bear gardens to boxing amphitheatres offers an illuminating case study to track the growing commercialisation of leisure. Within these cultural forms we witness continuities but also changes, not least in how the venues promoted themselves. That is not to say that the Bear Gardens were not commercial, clearly publicans and bookies had been profiting from such events for much of the early modern period, but the amphitheatre displays an increasingly sophisticated manipulation of the press, as well as displaying crucial changes in how its performers presented themselves to a wider public.

AMPHITHEATRES

While the bear gardens would face some of the earliest moral campaigns against blood sports³⁸, their closures did not signal the end of blood sports in the capital nor country³⁹. They did, however, represent a changing attitude to animals in performance, with cruelty eventually being replaced by display and admiration, culminating with circus in the 1760s and 1770s⁴⁰. Yet fighting between men, and sometimes women, remained a popular attraction and had enough support from the aristocracy to help it flourish in the commercial culture that was developing around it. Dedicated amphitheatres, probably with the help of loans from the wealthy, began to replace the older mode of performance. By this point animal baiting was rare at such venues, and by the 1730s and 1740s was

³⁶ Harris, *Sport in Newspapers*, p.24.

³⁷ Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* Cambridge, (Harvard, 1978)

³⁸ In 1724, newspapers were reporting that 'the Justices of the Peace for the City of Westminster and County of Middlesex, are about to suppress those publick and scandalous nusances the Bear-Gardens', *Weekly Journal or British Gazer*, (August 29th, 1724).

³⁹ See Douglas A. Reid, 'Beasts and Brutes: Popular Blood Sports c. 1780 – 1860', in Richard Holt (ed.); *Sport and the Working Class in Modern Britain* (Manchester, 1990)

⁴⁰ Marius Kwint, 'The Circus and Nature in Late Georgian England', in Rudy Koshar (ed.); *Histories of Leisure* (Oxford, 2002).

almost unheard of. Likewise, from the 1730s there was a shift away from sword play and weapons with an increased focus on fist-fighting, but its original pleasures – the thrill of watching individuals fight for pleasure – remained unchanged.

During the 1720s several amphitheatres were opened in London, and the most famous of these were James Figg's and James Stokes'. As grandiloquent as such venues may have sounded, the 'amphitheatres' were in fact semi-permanent wooden structures, 'a cross between a large fairground booth and a theatre'⁴¹. Byrom records in his journals that entrance cost 2s. 6d.⁴², the equivalent of about the average worker's day's wages⁴³. For some critics this is proof that the prices were designed in order to keep the establishment exclusive⁴⁴ and there remains a wealth of evidence that Figg encouraged patronage from the upper classes, but its exclusivity is doubtful. Guttman presents a number of diary extracts which suggests Figg's still attracted audience members from across the classes⁴⁵, and Henricks maintains that most prize-fights in the capital offered differentiated admissions prices which separated the classes, with the cheapest in the pit 'to prevent the gentleman the inconvenience of having a performer fall off the stage into his lap'⁴⁶. What is important to note is that all these venues competed to provide a sense of comfort and safety to paying customers, particularly for those from the middle- and upper-classes.

What was clear, however, was that the amphitheatres flourished in popularity and profit, and to sustain this popularity they relied on advertising, like other goods and services of the period, to help foster and sustain audiences. This reliance on promotion

⁴¹ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.4.

⁴² John Byrom, *Selections from the Journals and Papers of John Byrom: Poet – Diarist – Shorthand Writer, 1691 – 1763*, (London, 1950): p.66.

⁴³ Guttman, *English Sports Spectators*, p.115.

⁴⁴ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.4.

⁴⁵ Guttman, *English Sports Spectators*, p.115.

⁴⁶ Henricks, *The Democratization of Sport*, p.14.

had been started by the promoters at the bear gardens. As the burgeoning press had grown small notes promoting the forthcoming fights at the bear gardens became prominent in the classified advertisement pages, replacing the procession through the city as the primary form of promotion. One advertisement, with the text likely a word-for-word copy of the handbills handed out on the processions, and typical of the style of many, declared:

This present Tuesday, being the 26th of September, will be perform'd (at His majesty's BearGarden in Hockley in the Hole) a trial of skill, between John Anderson the Famous highlander, and John Terrewest of Oundle in North-Hamptonshire, at all the usual weapons.⁴⁷

Compared to what advertisements were to become the tone is subdued. The names are listed, as is one hometown, but otherwise there is little information to be taken. There is certainly no sense of personal resentment between the two men. The colour of the event itself – the blood, costume, character and drama – is absent. Over the next two decades, however, promotion would gradually take on a more sensationalised tone and would litter the classified pages of daily and weekly newspapers. In the early 1720s one newspaper advertisement for a prize-fight at the Bear Garden read:

Whereas I Edward Sutton, pipe-maker, from Gravesend in the county of Kent, Master of the noble Science of Defence, thinking myself to be the most Celebrated master of the noble Science of Defence, thinking myself to be the most Celebrated Master of that kind in Europe, hearing the famous James Figg, who is call'd the Oxfordshire Champion, has the character to be the onliest Master in the World, do fairly invite him to meet me, and exercise at the usual Weapons fought on the stage, desiring no favour from the hero's hand, and not question in the least but to give such satisfaction, that has not been given for some years past by that Champion. I, James Figg, from Thame in Oxfordshire, Master of the Said Science, will not fail to meet this celebrated Master, at the place and time appointed; and to his request of no favour, I freely grant it, for I never did, nor will

⁴⁷ Classified Advertisement, *Post Boy* (September 23, 1699).

show any to no man living, and doubt not but I shall convince
him of his own brave opinion.⁴⁸

The challenge and acceptance that had been used on the stages of the bear gardens and transferred to the press in the early decades of the century now utilised a greater range of promotional hyperbole and ballyhoo. Sutton is convinced of his superiority where Figg implies his challenger is arrogant and egotistical. Brailsford has described that contests operated ‘within the framework of challenges issued and accepted, with manliness, strength and courage held to be as much at issue as fighting skill’⁴⁹. Within the columns of the newspapers promoters were becoming more adept at capturing the drama audiences were used to seeing on the stage. Honour, in its melodramatic form, was used as a device to generate interest in the reading and listening public. Brailsford rightly suggest that if ‘the build-up could give an impression of rancour between the fighters it was likely to whet more appetites and increase the takings’⁵⁰.

The added spice of rivalry that the promoters constructed in the press successfully maximised the profits of the and/or promoters and pugilists, who benefited financially from larger attendances. The commercial environment that the amphitheatre was competing in goes some way towards explaining the pugilist’s drive to promote the venture with ever-growing excitement. Other entertainments and material products were advertised with increasing frequency, and products needed to stand-out in order to attract the largest possible audience. Promoters and owners had to be creative in their approaches. 1725 witnessed an international fight, probably the first of its kind that publicised itself as such, between an Italian, the ‘Venetian Gondolier’, and an Englishman, Whitacre. The prospect of the international fight created huge interest and

⁴⁸ Classified advertisement, *Daily Post* (April 10th, 1723).

⁴⁹ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.129

⁵⁰ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.130.

this was further encouraged in inventive ways. There even appears to have been an early form of ‘press conference’ conducted at a local coffee-house with the sole intention of stoking further speculation in the papers, encouraging higher ticket prices, and generally promoting Figg and his enterprise:

The combatants have had an interview, when the English Champion took the Italian by the hand, and invited him to one bout for love (as he termed it) before-hand; but he declined it. In a word, the publick daily enter into this affair with so much passion for the event, and gentlemen are so warm on both sides, that it looks like a national concern.⁵¹

Where Figg’s was the most famous of the amphitheatres, its closest rival, Stoke’s, also had its own selling points unique to the venue and regularly alluded to in the advertisements: Elizabeth Stokes (nee Wilkinson), the wife of James Stokes, who would fight on her own or as a husband and wife team against other men and women. Kasia Boddy offers a timely observation, pointing out that advertisements for female pugilists focused more on the ‘scanty dress rather than the skill of the participants’⁵². Rarely were men’s outfits described in detail. Authors of advertisements for female pugilism clearly saw the clothing the women would wear to be an important selling point, though this may have served a dual purpose: to deflect criticism from some quarters who considered the fights to be salacious – after all, they were wearing *something* – whilst surreptitiously announcing the nature of the fight.

After Figg’s death in the 1730s, George Taylor took over the running of the amphitheatre. Like his predecessor, Taylor was acutely aware of the power of marketing, perhaps even more so; his advertisements, according to Brailsford, ‘were lurid with the promise of combat, mayhem and gore’⁵³. The importance of advertising in commercial

⁵¹ *The London Journal* (16th January 1725)

⁵² Boddy, *Boxing*, p.28

⁵³ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.6.

ventures would further be emphasised when Jack Broughton's Great Booth went into direct competition with Taylor. After failing to meet demands for comfort from his upper-class patrons⁵⁴, Broughton's ventured opened in 1743. In all advertisements Broughton was quick to stress the grand surroundings of his booth. In addition, Broughton did all he could to undermine his rival: the amphitheatre was practically next door to The Great Booth, diverting audiences on performances whom had little distance to travel. The advertisements described it as near Figg's⁵⁵, playing on Broughton's connection to the old amphitheatre and master. Broughton's opening night coincided with an important fight between Taylor and Field⁵⁶, leading Taylor to complain that, 'in order to injure me [Broughton] maliciously advertised to open his amphitheatre on that day'⁵⁷, and thereafter all performances clashed with Taylor's. Prices at the new amphitheatre were drastically reduced in comparison to what had been standard admission costs – 'no person,' one advertisement declared, 'is to pay more than a shilling'⁵⁸.

Gore, blood and sex may have been promised to eager audiences, but the advertisements also refer to previous matches, to on-going rivalries, with the knowledge that audiences would be familiar with such accounts. In nearly all the advertisements for the various amphitheatres there is an acknowledgement – sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit – that readers have already heard about those taking part. For all the gimmicks, press conferences, ticket discounts and general commercial puffery, there is one thing that remains crucial to all these accounts: celebrity.

CELEBRITY

⁵⁴ *The Sporting Magazine* in Sheard, *Civilizing Process*, p.118.

⁵⁵ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.7.

⁵⁶ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.7.

⁵⁷ Pierce Egan, *Boxiana: or Sketches of Ancient and Modern Pugilism Vol. 1* (London, 1830): p.50.

⁵⁸ Brailsford, *Bareknuckles*, p.7.

If early histories of fame often posited that celebrity was a peculiarly twentieth-century phenomenon, then more recently there has been a range of revisionist histories that posit celebrity is in fact a product of the eighteenth century⁵⁹. Though such work has offered a rich and much-needed reevaluation of the eighteenth century, such accounts often place their case studies in the second half of the century rather than the first. In those first decades, however, we see the conditions emerge to allow something resembling a celebrity culture as we understand it today. Crucially, developments in the economy and the restructuring of society allow a recognisable celebrity culture to emerge, and for the remainder of the chapter I want to explore the relationship between the commercial culture and the changing nature of fame and sport.

Douglas C. North and Barry R. Weingast, in their influential study, suggest that the 1688 Glorious Revolution played a major role in development of private markets that were divorced from the arbitrary power of the crown, facilitating the commercial revolution that followed by stabilising the market and public and private debt, allowing for investment and commercial expansion⁶⁰. Dramatic changes to the private market and incentives to trade and loan would also be accompanied by industrial innovations and the restructuring of the workforce. In particular, London saw the subdivision of labour was beginning to help produce the commodities of this commercial culture. These two things working in tandem would have dramatic consequences for celebrity.

First, in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, wider political representation is highlighted by Leo Braudy's as being a key moment in the history of fame⁶¹. With newspapers and books available to be printed and sold on the market, writers were

⁵⁹ Barry, *Death and Celebrity*; Inglis, *A Short History of Celebrity*; Mole, *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture*; Tillyard, *Celebrity in 18th-Century London*.

⁶⁰ Douglas C. North and Barry R. Weingast, 'Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England', *The Journal of Economic History*, 49/4, (1989): pp.803-832

⁶¹ Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History*, (Oxford, 1986): p.352

‘liberated from dependence on aristocratic or royal patrons’⁶²; literary value rather than royal contacts and contracts become the primary celebration of an individual’s work. In boxing we see a similar pattern emerge. Some, though by no means all, prize-fighters were able to move away from their reliance on *either* collections at the end of the match *or* full patronage, and they are able to present themselves as marketable commodities in a number of ways. Simon Morgan is right to criticise the ease in which Braudy presents this history, and the tensions between aristocratic and royal patrons and sporting events, most notably boxing⁶³, would be found throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the introduction of Queensberry rules and the control of the Sporting Club. However, this moment does, I think, signify something important, and being able to trade on the market allows cultural entrepreneurs to professionalise their skills.

Second, critics have argued that the division of labour is also a condition which societies should meet in order for stars and stardom to flourish⁶⁴. Increasingly the subdivision of labour was beginning to be used in London⁶⁵ before becoming a defining feature of industrial centres across England as the eighteenth century progressed⁶⁶. Alberoni contends that, prior to the industrialisation of this period, social role and tasks had a greater degree of fluidity, with individuals moving between forms of production and leisure. As individual’s roles and positions become defined by the jobs they were expected to undertake, interests or skills secondary to their primary tasks began to be seen as irrelevant. Such a social structure offered some individuals an opportunity to become professionally defined by the entertainments they offered. In such an instance,

⁶² Simon Morgan, *Celebrity*, p.101.

⁶³ Morgan, *Celebrity*, p.101

⁶⁴ Francesco Alberoni, ‘The Powerless “Elite”’: Theory and Sociological Research on the Phenomenon of the Stars’, in Dennis McQuail (ed.) *Sociology of Mass Communications: Selected Readings* (Middlesex, 1972): p.79.

⁶⁵ Peter Ackroyd *London: The Biography* (London, 2000): p.473

⁶⁶ Maxine Berg, ‘Small Producer Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Business History*, 35/1 (1993): p.23

the ‘behaviour of the spectator is defined by exclusion from this role and by retention of his ordinary roles. The spectator is present at, shares in, but does not act’⁶⁷.

The lapsed licensing acts in the wake of the glorious revolution, furthermore, allowed for the growth of newspapers and publishing: this publishing culture created literary stars free from royal patronage, and would also allow celebrity to flourish. Repeatedly in modern theories of celebrity, the availability of media (though more often with the prefix mass-), is seen as a defining feature. Newspapers were able to report the events of an individual sporting star to a much larger audience than the small numbers in attendance at a particular event. Increasingly, an ‘imagined community’ of nation⁶⁸, and some London papers clearly had a national readership in mind⁶⁹, were able to keep up to date with the activities of individuals who they had likely never met. Crucial in this regard, according to Alberoni, celebrity exists when ‘each individual member of the public knows the star, but the star does not know any individuals’⁷⁰. We might be critical of Byrom’s reasons for extolling Figg’s, but his poem was perhaps attempting to capture a particular historical moment where fame was being distributed across the country with help from the press: ‘To the towns, far and near, did his valour extend, And swam down the river from *Thame* to *Gravesend*’⁷¹.

Moreover, just as newspapers were indicative of the commercial culture that was growing around them, many theories of celebrity posit that ‘celebrity culture is irrevocably bound up with commodity culture’⁷². Celebrities become products in themselves, used as a selling point in order to attract paying audiences to a particular

⁶⁷ Alberoni, *The Powerless Elite*, p. 79.

⁶⁸ Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991). For a wider discussion of nation and celebrity see Jason Goldsmith, ‘Celebrity and the Spectacle of Nation: in Tom Mole (ed.); *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture 1750 – 1850*, (Cambridge, 2009)

⁶⁹ T.R. Nevett, *Advertising in Britain: A History*, (London, 1982): p.17.

⁷⁰ Alberoni, *The Powerless Elite*, p.77.

⁷¹ John Byrom, *Miscellaneous Poems Volume 1*, (Manchester, 1773)

⁷² Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, (London, 2001) : p.14

entertainment; celebrities become devices to sell newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets; and their images are used to create and sell merchandise for other products destined for the market⁷³. Prints, for example, commemorating various sporting occasions and sporting celebrities, for example, were being produced by various enterprising entrepreneurs⁷⁴, not least by the sportsmen themselves. On January 19th 1731 newspapers were advertising the publication of:

The Stage Gladiators: A Clear Stage and No Favour, with the effigies of the Champions curiously engraven on copper. Printed for Messieurs Figg and Sutton, and sold by the Pamphlet-mongers of London and Westminster. Price 6d.⁷⁵

The advert is interesting for three reasons. First, Figg and Sutton were supposedly sworn rivals, yet here they were seemingly working in partnership to profit from their rivalry. We might posit that this is merely a business relationship, but there is, I would suggest, the very real possibility that the sworn enemies presented in other advertisements were the simply the products of promotion. In that case, then the performers become closer to the fictional representation – or at the very least highly mediated performance of self – that would characterise celebrity in the coming centuries⁷⁶. Second, it highlights an early example of the role of sporting celebrity in relation to commodity culture. Third, the distribution of images would again play a central role in how celebrity would be understood in the coming centuries. Images, of course, allowed individuals to be recognised by those who had no personal interaction

⁷³ Morgan, *Celebrity*, p.96

⁷⁴ The selling of prints with cricket as the subject matter has also been noted by Harris, *Sport in the Newspapers*, p.27

⁷⁵ Classified advertisement, *London Evening Post*, (January 19th, 1731)

⁷⁶ Joshua Gamson 'The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth Century America', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 9/1 (1992): pp. 1-24

with the celebrity⁷⁷, reinforcing the distance between performer and audience that was simultaneously being created by the press.

Images of boxers could be found elsewhere, not least in the trade cards distributed to promote their schools of arms. Trade cards were another important form of promotion of early eighteenth century commerce, and though they advertised particular services, often spoke to a ‘universe of commodities’⁷⁸. James Figg’s trade card has been a source of confusion, long thought to be the work of William Hogarth the work has more recently been credited to Anna Maria Ireland⁷⁹. Mistakes about the designer’s identity are easy to understand: Hogarth included Figg in his *Southwark Fair* print and designed the imagery for George Taylor’s headstones. More importantly, perhaps, these trade cards were deliberately designed to reference ‘images familiar across other types of print culture’⁸⁰. Indeed, it might have been purposely designed to appear like a Hogarth. Such references not only highlight the vibrancy of that visual culture for the period but also the importance of a visual culture for celebrity.

Figg, then, and those who followed him in the years after his death, used the trade cards, along with newspaper advertisements and its accompanying hyperbole, press conferences and performances, to create a brand⁸¹, a marketing concept that was itself becoming an important role in the commercial culture of eighteenth-century England⁸². This brand was used by performers to make profits in other ways: when the venue was not being used for exhibitions it doubled as an equally extravagantly named ‘school-of-arms’, where Figg taught the use of weapons to his upper-class patrons.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Barry, ‘Celebrity, Cultural Production and Public Life’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11/3 (2008): p.253; Morgan, *Celebrity*, p.103.

⁷⁸ Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, p. 275

⁷⁹ Stephen Hardy, Brian Norman and Sarah Sceery, ‘Toward a History of Sport Branding’ *Historical Research in Marketing* 4/4 (2012): p.487

⁸⁰ Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, p.275

⁸¹ Hardy, Norman and Sceery, *History of Sport Branding*, p.487

⁸² Nevett, *Advertising in Britain*, p.24

Some spectators, then, were able to meet and train with these professionals in the amphitheatres as a training gym on days they were not being used as sporting arenas. But this raises an important question to be asked about celebrity: to what extent did the desire to meet, mingle with or touch the famed pugilist – in other words the desire to overcome the distance created by the new forms of commercialised leisure – play in his school of arm's success? In every instance, products sold on the market promised, if only momentarily, to overcome the distance that a commercial leisure culture created. Paying for a ticket to see the boxer in person, paying even more to meet the boxer in person, or buying a print with boxer's image on, offered the opportunity for audiences to feel closer to the individual that through the mechanisms of capitalism were placed at a distance.

CONCLUSIONS

To our modern eyes the sporting celebrities of the early eighteenth century seem modest. But however modest they may appear to our modern eyes in this chapter I have wanted to stress that this was a rich and vivid culture. The period did not merely sow the seeds of our own obsessions with fame and the famous but was itself blossoming. Boxers and their actions were regular fixtures of gossip and their exploits were as much part of the coffee-shop centred public sphere as conversations about politics. Figg and Broughton and the other names so often referenced in the sporting history books were active in the creation of their own fame. Pugilists used multiple mediums to spread their names and images across the country. Their entrepreneurial actions was a driving force in the creation of their own celebrity: they devised press conferences, used hyperbole and created public speculation in a manner that P. T. Barnum would have been proud of in

the next century. This was a celebrity culture, for better or worse, with its own peculiarities and specificities.

Yet it is also clear that to speak of a celebrity culture is also to speak of a commercial culture. The arrival of boxing amphitheatres and the celebrities they fostered were the consequences of the radical changes in society, in the economy and politics. The growth of newspaper networks and the development of industrial techniques all contributed to pugilists' successes and the manner in which they were able to publicise themselves. Celebrities and capitalism are tied together, and to understand the celebrities of the day is to understand culture and capitalism more broadly.