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Review:

Mendoza the Jew: Boxing, Manliness and Nationalism, A Graphic History, Ronald Schechter and Liz Clarke

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*Mendoza the Jew: Boxing, Manliness and Nationalism, A Graphic History*, Ronald Schechter and Liz Clarke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), ISBN 978-0-19-933409-4, pp. 240, £12.99.

Daniel Mendoza (1764–1836) was a successful bare-knuckle boxer and Heavyweight Champion of England from 1792 to 1795. A pioneer in many respects, Mendoza was the first Jew (as it turned out, of many) to become a champion pugilist, the author of the first textbook on boxing technique, and the originator of a so-called “scientific” style of boxing, which saw defensive strategies such as blocking and side-stepping introduced into a sport in which participants hitherto had simply stood and traded blows and/or wrestled each other to the ground.

While he cut a diminutive figure (he boxed as a heavyweight, despite being only 5ft 7 and 11 stone – 154 pounds), he was a towering presence in late Georgian England. His contemporary fame and celebrity should not be understated. He was said to be the first boxer ever presented to a reigning monarch, and one epic fight in July 1789 kept news of the storming of the Bastille off the front pages in the British press, both at home and in the colonies. As this volume states, he was a “symbol” (p. xv) both to his own community – as an example of how sporting success could lead to social acceptance and mobility – and to wider British society – as an embodiment of values and sentiments such as pluck, courage, determination, intrinsically linked to British national identity.

Following in the footsteps of *Abina and the Important Men* (a “graphic history” published in 2011, which focused on a case study of a Ghanaian slave girl to examine notions of personhood, gender, colonialism and, especially, the “craft” of history), *Mendoza the Jew* similarly utilises the fascinating story of one individual as a means of investigating broader historical issues, in this case the link between sport and national/ethnic identity. Schechter, an expert in French history, also notes that exploring and explaining Mendoza’s story acts as a means of gaining “a deeper understanding of how the discipline of history works” (p. xvi).

The first ninety-five pages of *Mendoza the Jew* focus on a largely narrative account of Mendoza’s life and career, with text supplemented by vivid illustrations by the artist Liz Clarke (who was also responsible for the artwork for *Abina and the Important Men*). Here, we learn a great deal

about how Mendoza, a second-generation Sephardi immigrant, exists both within and between the two worlds of his ethnic and national community. British and Jewish culture come together in his life in both a complementary and, sometimes, contradictory fashion. At school, Mendoza's integration is aided by the teaching of "English grammar, writing and arithmetic", yet his attachment to his Jewish faith and culture is strengthened through learning Hebrew; "in which", Mendoza notes, "I made considerable progress" (p. 9). Mendoza would refuse to work on the Sabbath due to his religious sensibilities, but would regularly box or instruct in boxing on Saturdays. His success attracted many young Jews to a sport that, while increasingly popular in British society, was widely condemned by sections of the British-Jewish religious and lay leadership.

On the face of it, Mendoza was "embraced" by the nation and by high society as a result of his exploits in the ring (p. 96). He mixed with royalty during his career and was also known to go fox-hunting with rich friends and backers. Yet in fact, as Schechter notes, his difference was never forgotten. He may have become something of a national icon, with millions eagerly following his career in newspapers and thousands buying commemorative Staffordshire pottery commemorating his victories. Even so, in the eyes of other boxers, the boxing establishment, the press, and large sections of British society, he remained "The Jew" throughout his career and after (p. 102).

The volume also offers a useful insight into the development of the sport, explaining how the foundations of modern boxing were laid down by Mendoza and his contemporaries. Chapter Two ("Boxing Lessons") explores Mendoza's development and dissemination of his "scientific" theory of ringcraft. It was revolutionary at the time, but played a key role in helping boxing to legitimize itself in the eyes of the wider sporting and British community (a process which culminated in the introduction of the Queensbury Rules, governed by fairness and "clean" fighting, in the 1860s). The discussion of the run-up to Mendoza's second bout against Richard Humphreys at Stilton, Huntingdonshire, in 1788 – with a protracted and often personal pre-fight build-up, media concentration on the "rivalry" between the combatants, and entrepreneurs hyping up the fight to maximize their financial gain – is evocative of most major fights in the modern day. Similarly, with Mendoza we see an early example of the now familiar archetype of the "Ghetto warrior", an outsider rising from poverty to riches and the status of ethnic, local, and national hero, only

to fall just as quickly into obscurity and the mire of financial strife and physical ruin.

In the second half of the volume, focusing on related primary sources, historical context, a methodological exploration, and suggested practical exercises, Schechter moves from exploring the development of ringcraft to discussing the craft of history. There are pithy statements – “History does not come ready made. You have to build it yourself. Primary sources are the building blocks” (p. 101) – that will either inspire or inspire the rolling of eyes. There are also, though, important and accessible discussions of the significance of interpretation and the manner in which historians create narrative and incorporate contextual and contemporary information. Part IV on “The Making of *Mendoza the Jew*” is arguably the most fascinating section of the book in this respect. Here the author gives a blow-by-blow account of the creation of the volume, from its origins, through research (including an acknowledgement of the “addictive” nature of searching online databases), the individual and collective aspect of writing, structuring and editing through to the publication process. This story would and should prove enlightening to students of history interested in the origin, evolution, and completion of a work of history. Schechter’s almost throwaway comment on his considerable reliance on online sources for the volume – key to making the project “feasible” (p. 177) – acts as a timely reminder of how the nature and process of historical research has changed in the digital age.

The “graphic history” at the start of the book does contain some insights into the link between pugilism and identity, but those wanting to learn more about Mendoza’s story, Jewish history in Britain, or the development of “modern” sport are better served by seeking out the related historiography on these areas (much of which Schechter lists in his detailed bibliography). Those expecting a traditional historical analysis will find the brief and all too general contextual section (pp. 155–69), as well as the admission of “liberties” being taken with Mendoza’s story – including the creation of “dramatic effect or comic relief” through the introduction of “invented characters” into the narrative (p. 188) – somewhat disconcerting.

This is missing the point, though. *Mendoza the Jew* is much more about the study of history than about the study of a famous British Jewish pugilist, the Jewish minority community, or the evolution of sport. As a class- or seminar-room text that can offer students an inspiring introduction to

the art and craft of history and act as a demystifier of the discipline, this volume's worth is inestimable. Yet, the author's frank discussions of the frustrations, complications, revelations, and collaborations inherent in the crafting of this work of history are also likely to resonate with historians of all levels of experience.

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