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**Bob Mee**. *Bare Fists: The History of Bare-Knuckle Prize-Fighting*. Woodstock and New York: Overlook Press, 2001. 241 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58567-141-0.

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## The Great Man (in the Ring) Approach to History

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In the beginning, there were only bare knuckles. Bob Mee's most recent book, *Bare Fists*, is an ode to this gloveless era, a eulogy to a time when bare-fisted pugilism breathed competitive meaning into the lives of men who inhabited a world in which violence was a part of daily existence.

Focusing almost exclusively on the mighty champions who dominated the sport, Mee charts bare-knuckle prizefighting's transformation from its beginnings, as an amusement once lumped with other sanguinary pastimes such as cockfighting and public hangings, to a celebrated and even somewhat fashionable modern spectacle. Starting with modern boxing's genesis in the early 1700s at a London establishment named "the Adam and Eve," Mee's investigation pushes forward nearly two centuries and chronicles the rise and fall of industrial America's first national sporting hero, the incomparable John L. Sullivan, whose 1889 victory over Jake Kilrain in seventy-five rounds of Mississippi heat turned out to be the last of the great bare-knuckle contests.

All of the great champions are here, and their heroic accomplishments are relayed through a bout-by-bout history of the controversial sport. Paralleling these stories is the tale of pugilism's institutional evolution. Beginning in the early days when the only rule was that there were no rules, Mee recounts the adoption of first the Broughton and next the London Prize Ring Rules (the latter of which prohibited the use of spiked boots!), up through the late-nineteenth century adoption of the Marquis of Queensbury Rules, when timed rounds and mandatory glove-wearing signaled pugilism's more disciplined status. Mee also tacks on two chapters that highlight the continued existence of bare-knuckle boxing despite legislation forcing the sport underground. Here he points to the resurgence of "fight clubs," now faddish among post-industrial males, as well as the continued popularity of bare-fist brawling among communities of gypsies and Irish "travellers." For men in both groups, bare-knuckle fighting has served as a means to demonstrate individual ferocity in a setting that simultaneously confers communal identity.

The strength of *Bare Fists* lies in the vivid recreation of the fights themselves. Mee's evocative prose opens a window into the cruel and colorful England of Swift and Dickens, where stories of swollen eyes, broken limbs, and knocked out teeth share time with tales of prodigious drinking, fallen women, and early funerals. Mee, who has covered boxing for over two decades for the British Daily Telegraph and Boxing News, is a wonderfully descriptive writer, and possesses a literary style quite worthy of the bombastic standards set by sportswriters centuries ago. Here is how Mee begins his chapter on John L. Sullivan, prizefighting's last bare-knuckle champion: "And so on to the edge of the gloveless Dark Ages came John L., the unbeatable son of a mother who wanted a priest for a son, and who got only, gloriously, John L., a bully, an idol, a big-mouthed drunk, a braggart who believed his own boast that he could lick any son-of-a-bitch in the house, and who, in the ten long years of his sublime and ridiculous prime, probably could" (p. 180).

It's all great stuff, but entertaining writing and fascinating tales aside, what gets lost among all these stories of great fighters is any semblance of a contextual and logical narrative. Decades run together indistinguishably, and one is never quite sure if bare-knuckle prizefighting is wildly popular or on the verge of prohibition. Dis-