

## **“Million Dollar Baby” And The Memories It Stirs**

By Robert Cassidy

On battlefields, in parades, even during the walk to the ring, bagpipes have long inspired the great Celtic warriors.

In 1977, I was sitting ringside at the Long Island Arena when the drone of bagpipes began to fill the building. I was 11 years old and it was my first memory of such sounds. The pipers immediately made me aware of two things -- there was a soundtrack to my heritage and the main event loomed.

On that night, the pipers would accompany two fighters to the boxing ring. The man I cheered was my father, "Irish" Bobby Cassidy, a New Yorker, in kelly green trunks. His opponent was Christy Elliot, a Dubliner, with white trunks and green shamrock logo. The fight, as they say, was a donnybrook. My father lifted himself off the canvas to win a 10-round decision and something the promoters called the "Irish-America Light Heavyweight Title."

The title carried little significance in the rankings, it was merely a ploy to fill the arena with Irish fans loyal to the local fighter and Irish fans loyal to the boy from 'The Auld Sod.'

This all comes back to me after watching the Oscar-nominated film "Million Dollar Baby." Director Clint Eastwood needs no such contrivances. Yes, bagpipers lead protagonist Maggie Fitzgerald to the ring, but it is not a gratuitous nod to Irish culture, rather a commitment to detail and a stirring accompaniment to battle.

Eastwood and screenwriter Paul Haggis tapped into the short stories of F.X. Toole, and gave us a brilliant visual image to the courageous and passionate characters that Toole constructed in his book. They come to life beautifully on the screen and quickly draw you into their corner, literally and figuratively. Ultimately, you cannot help but care about them.

This is not a boxing movie as much as it is a story about people who live in the world of boxing. It is about a fighter and a trainer and their journey to the world title, but more succinctly, their journey together. That's what I recall most about my father's career, not the individual fights, but the journey and the bonds formed along the way. He pursued the world title with great pride, and he took his family along for a terrific and tumultuous ride. And in this film, the bond between the three main characters strengthens with each victory and defeat.

The film succeeds because it stays close to Toole's original work. Toole is actually the pen name of Jerry Boyd, a California-based boxing cut-man who wrote his collection of stories from an insider's vantage point. In his book "Rope Burns," which includes "Million Dollar Baby," he writes from the heart and does not sanitize his view of the sport. For all its promise of fame and fortune, boxing can be a cruel endeavor. The sport doles out ample amounts of pain, and they come in both the emotional and physical variety.

I have seen it firsthand. My father fought for 18 years as a pro, having walked up those steps to

the ring in his kelly green trunks 80 times. Often, he climbed back down with lacerated eyebrows or a purplish bruise rising from his cheekbone. Those marks were his badge of courage. My father fought and beat some of the best fighters in the world. He became a contender, the lofty status that the poor ex-pug Terry Molloy yearned for in "On the Waterfront." And yet, when my father retired from the ring, it wasn't the punches that hurt most, it was the fact that he was never given a title shot.

In the film, Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank), Frankie Dunn (Eastwood) and Eddie "Scrap-Iron" Dupris (Morgan Freeman), a former boxer, dwell far from boxing's glorious peak. They are surrounded by doubt and regret and failure at the rundown Los Angeles gym in which they toil. The actors take you inside the soul of the fight game and that alone makes each worthy of the Oscar nominations they've garnered. In addition to nods for each of the three main actors, the film received nominations for four more Academy Awards -- Best Motion Picture, Best Achievement in Directing, Best Writing (Screenplay Based on Material Previously Produced or Published), and Best Achievement in Editing.

The Irish theme to the movie is palpable, but subtle, although not as subtle as Eastwood's last picture, "Mystic River," set in a working class Irish enclave in Boston. Toole's book too is replete with Irish characters, hardly unusual because for decades the sport was saturated with Irish fighters, trainers and managers.

The scope of the Irish Diaspora is manifest as we learn of Fitzgerald's Theodosia, Mo., trailer-park upbringing and Dunn's West Coast roots. But it doesn't end there. Fitzgerald's breakthrough fight takes place in London where her performance elicits cheer after cheer by the huge throng of Irish immigrants in attendance. Fitzgerald entered the ring that night with the stage Irish expression "Macushla" scripted across the back of her kelly green boxing robe, along with a golden harp. By the end of the bout, the Irish in the crowd are standing and chanting, "Macushla, Macushla."

Dunn is a no-nonsense, old-school trainer who has never developed a champion. He also sends frequent letters to his daughter that are returned by her, unread. He reads Yeats aloud, practices Irish Gaelic and attends Mass every day, theologically sparring afterward with Father Horvak, the celebrant, played by Cavan-born actor Brian F. O'Byrne.

At first, Dunn resists the idea of training a woman, but 31-year-old Maggie's determination ultimately draws him to the assignment. They develop a father-daughter relationship, and Dunn adopts "Macushla" to express his growing affection for Maggie. Fitzgerald asks for a translation throughout, but it is not until one of the final scenes of the film that he provides it.

Swank is convincing as a fighter. Her punches are technically sound and appear to be powerful as she jolts the heavy bag during training scenes. She trained diligently at Gleason's Gym in Brooklyn under the tutelage of Hector Rocha, a man who once guided champions like Iran Barkley and WBC junior welterweight champion Arturo Gatti.

The fight scenes are a bit frenetic, but Swank's footwork and execution of combination punches are just as convincing as Sylvester Stallone's in the "Rocky" series.

Boxing may be the most solitary of sports. But few fighters ever really fight for themselves. They fight for their countries, their causes or their families. And those around them are drawn into the fight, if not the ring itself. I never had my hand raised after winning a fight at Madison Square Garden, but I was lucky enough to dance in the joy of my father's achievements. I never took the punches, but I still felt the pain he endured for so long.

In "Million Dollar Baby," Fitzgerald, Dunn and Dupris fight for each other. They are each drawn to the fight, each feeding off the other as the title bout draws near. It is their relationship that brings compassion to a violent film, it allows you to identify with their troubles and ultimately care for the characters. That the three of them are drawn so sympathetically and poignantly sets this film apart from all others in the boxing genre.

But don't confuse this movie with the upbeat message of "Rocky." "Million Dollar Baby" is true to the sport, and this is a sport where hearts are broken as often as noses.

There is a line from another Irish-themed film that could apply to "Million Dollar Baby." In "The Devil's Own," Brad Pitt plays an IRA gunrunner who tells his American adversary: "Don't look for a happy ending. It's not an American story. It's an Irish one."

To the Irish, the bagpipes have long signified a call to battle or a call to mourn. In "Million Dollar Baby," it may very well be both.