

# interview

WRITTEN BY Jack Coraggio • PHOTOGRAPHED BY Walter Kidd



Above, Gene Tunney and George Bernard Shaw. Right, Tunney working out.

One of George Bernard Shaw's earliest works, an 1882 novel entitled "Cashel Byron's Profession," offers a detailed account of a fictional Irish boxer who came from humble beginnings, dropped out of school at a young age and went on to become a world famous prizefighter. Two years into his illustrious boxing career, one that saw him build a reputation as a smart fighter of high moral fiber, the title character abandoned that life to marry a wealthy aristocratic woman with whom he eventually fathered four children.

Had Shaw written this story 40 years later, libraries may have been compelled to categorize it under biography, given that it is an almost uncanny transatlantic parallel to the life of legendary American boxer Gene Tunney. Tunney was an Irish-American scrapper from New York City who quit school at 15 and became one of the most celebrated and scientific heavyweight champion boxers of all time. Then, he left his fighting career at its pinnacle to pursue other interests, which included marrying Carnegie blue-blood Mary "Polly" Lauder, with whom he eventually fathered four children.

Indeed, because it spoke so closely to his own life, "Cashel Byron's Profession" was a personal favorite of Tunney's, a well-read, self-educated renaissance man and a deep admirer of Shaw. The similarity between the real boxer and the fictional one wasn't lost on the story's author either.

The Nobel Prize-winning Shaw was so intrigued by this case of life-

imitating-art, he sought to meet his own fan, Gene Tunney, a New York boxing champ some 40 years his junior.

A bond quickly formed, and the subsequent tale of their kinship is strangely compelling. So much so, Tunney's son, Jay, has spent years exploring it. Now, after co-writing a successful program about the relationship for the BBC, the younger Mr. Tunney recently completed a book about the unlikely friendship of Gene the fighter and George the writer.

"The relationship they had was very interesting; I knew it had to be written down," said Mr. Tunney from his Roxbury home. "I think dad gave Shaw a feeling of spirituality that he never had before. I think dad got from Shaw a feeling of 'live and let live' ... that we all have to help each other and that is what the world is supposed to be about."

At least as a novelty, it is of little surprise these two highly accomplished individuals became acquainted. But being that Shaw was a pacifist and a socialist, and Tunney was a chiseled boxer who proudly fought in World War I, some might find it a bit more curious that the two developed such a concrete bond. But to the younger Mr. Tunney, it makes perfect sense.

Shaw enjoyed the fighting spirit and the sense of upward mobility that was such a prevalent theme in much of his work. The boxer embodied that. The boxer, on the other hand, was a Shakespeare-quoting voracious reader who admired men of intellect and thoughtfulness. The author embodied that.

Their relationship was forever cemented after their first encounter, while Tunney and his wife were on honeymoon on the Island of Brijuni, where they had arranged to meet with Shaw. As both Tunney and Shaw stood by, Mrs. Tunney became deathly ill from appendicitis. Mere minutes before her appendix burst, the newlywed husband got on his knees and prayed for a miracle. That's when a doctor who specialized in appendectomies and was vacationing on the island, arrived. Shaw, a noted skeptic of faith, was floored by the incredible sequence of events.

"Shaw couldn't believe it," said Jay Tunney. "It was so very unusual, he took it as a miracle."

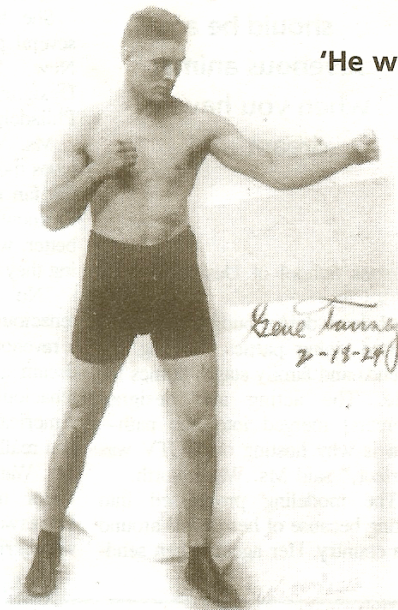
The younger Mr. Tunney also marvels at this wondrous event. After all, if it weren't for the perfect timing of that doctor, he wouldn't be around to tell his father's story today.

That story resonates loudly for Jay Tunney. The walls of his home are lined with numerous photographs of his dad, some in the ring (including a picture of the only time his father was ever knocked down, the now-infamous "long count" fight with Jack Dempsey, a match Tunney went on to win), and some with iconic figures (Shaw, Ernest Hemingway, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Babe Ruth, to name a few), and many more with the family.

Mr. Tunney talks with reverence about his dad's pre-championship



# The Playwright And the Boxer



**'He was like a fencer ... only  
his fists were  
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days as a poor Irish kid watching his own father work the New York docks, or as a World War I Marine, where he learned to fight. Mr. Tunney also regales a visitor about his dad's post-boxing days as a successful Wall Street businessman, a versatile author and a politically-minded citizen who stumped in Connecticut for FDR.

Mr. Tunney said it was these other, more cerebral pursuits that were truly stressed in the Stamford home he and his three siblings were raised in.

"He put the bar very high for us, and was always pushing us in the way of education. He always stressed great authors and had us memorize poems," recalled Mr. Tunney. "He was tremendously influential in that way. He believed in the physical and the mental, the body and the brain, but with more emphasis on brainpower. He saw that you couldn't go far without an education in this country."

Of course, many kids disregard fatherly wisdom, but who would argue with a guy who beat Jack Dempsey twice. His eldest son,

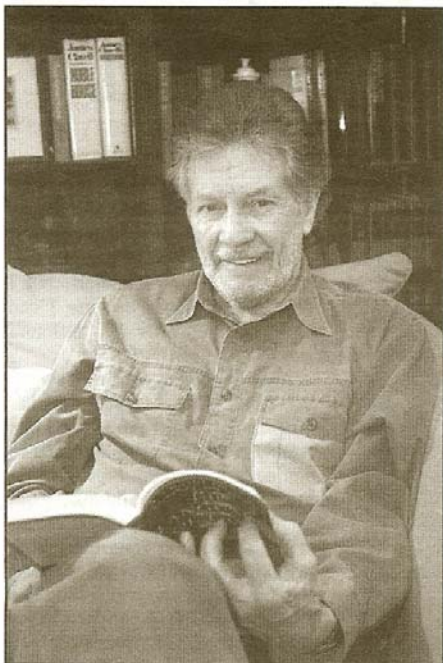
John, was a congressman and U.S. Senator from California from 1965 until 1977. Jay Tunney, also a former Marine, met his wife, Kelly, while he was in Washington, D.C., working on his brother's campaign.

After marrying, they had two children and then spent some 20 entrepreneurial years in Asia, including 10 years in South Korea, where he successfully pioneered his own chain of gourmet ice cream shops, that's right, gourmet ice cream shops. His mother's third cousin was steel mogul Andrew Carnegie, so the business side of the younger Mr. Tunney may have been an inherited maternal trait.

Still, he becomes most animated when he recalls his father, the boxer, an undisputed heavyweight champion who retired from the ring with an outstanding record of 77-1-3, the one loss being to Harry Greb. The younger Mr. Tunney can't help but employ some nimble shadowboxing techniques to accompany the play-by-play of any of his father's numerous professional bouts.

"He was like a fencer ... only his fists were the sword," said Mr. Tunney, who began to box the air in a slow motion replay of his father's stick-and-move strategy. "He'd dart in, pound you with a right, then dart out, come back with another. He'd punish his opponents, and the secret to his success is he did it scientifically."

A tall, handsome and sturdy man with a bristly white beard, a bushy gray mane and a vice-like handshake, the 72-year-old Mr. Tunney is somewhat reminiscent of western film star Jack Palance in his later years. Even living a quiet life of



Jay Tunney at home in Roxbury.

intellectual reflection in Litchfield County, Mr. Tunney still seems fit enough to wrestle a man half his age to the ground.

That's probably another trait passed on from his dad, who died in 1978 at the age of 81. But, again, his father was a thinking fighter.

"Today, these guys are out to murder each other. In dad's time, he would wear other guys down, maybe get blood in their eyes until

they couldn't see and win by TKO," said Mr. Tunney with a grin.

His dad's near perfect record is considered by some boxing historians as being the greatest of all time. Of course, 1950s heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano finished his career undefeated at 49-0. So the argument often delves into what's better, 77-1 or 49-0?

Edward Brophy, the executive director of the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, N.Y., considers the Tunney vs. Marciano battle of records a futile debate that

often leads boxing historians to a draw. But he does agree with Jay Tunney's assessment that his father brought a sweet science to the sweet science.

"Gene's style was smooth and precise, and he could box from the outside if need be, or if he had to brawl with someone he could trade punches as well. He was very well-balanced, and fighting him was a challenge for all of his opponents,"

noted Mr. Brophy, who oversaw Tunney's 1990 induction into the boxing hall.

"He was well respected and had an outstanding boxing career, one to be complemented by his life outside the ring," added Mr. Brophy, who listed Tunney alongside Muhammad Ali and Floyd Patterson for their level of post-boxing influence on society. "I wish I had an opportunity to meet Gene Tunney. I'd be very interested in hearing his life story."

It's a common sentiment—even George Bernard Shaw wished to meet Gene Tunney. In fact, if Mr. Brophy finds a print of "Cashel Bryon's Profession," it could strangely give him better insight into the life and times of the legendary boxer.

Or he can wait for Jay Tunney's book to be released, but as he is still shopping around for publishers, even Mr. Tunney is unsure of the drop date.

Even the title of the book is up for discussion. The BBC program he co-wrote was known as "The Master and the Boy," but for the book, Mr. Tunney is considering "The Prizefighter and the Playwright" or "Blood and Soul."

However, he was admittedly intrigued by an African proverb that he feels largely represents his father's relationship with Shaw, and is also fitting for a story about a smart, smooth fighter: "When you pray, move your feet."