

REVIEWS by John Exshaw

Babyface Goes To Hollywood: Fighters, Mobsters & Film Stars — The Jimmy McLarnin Story by Andrew Gallimore

Jew killer to some, toast of the town to others

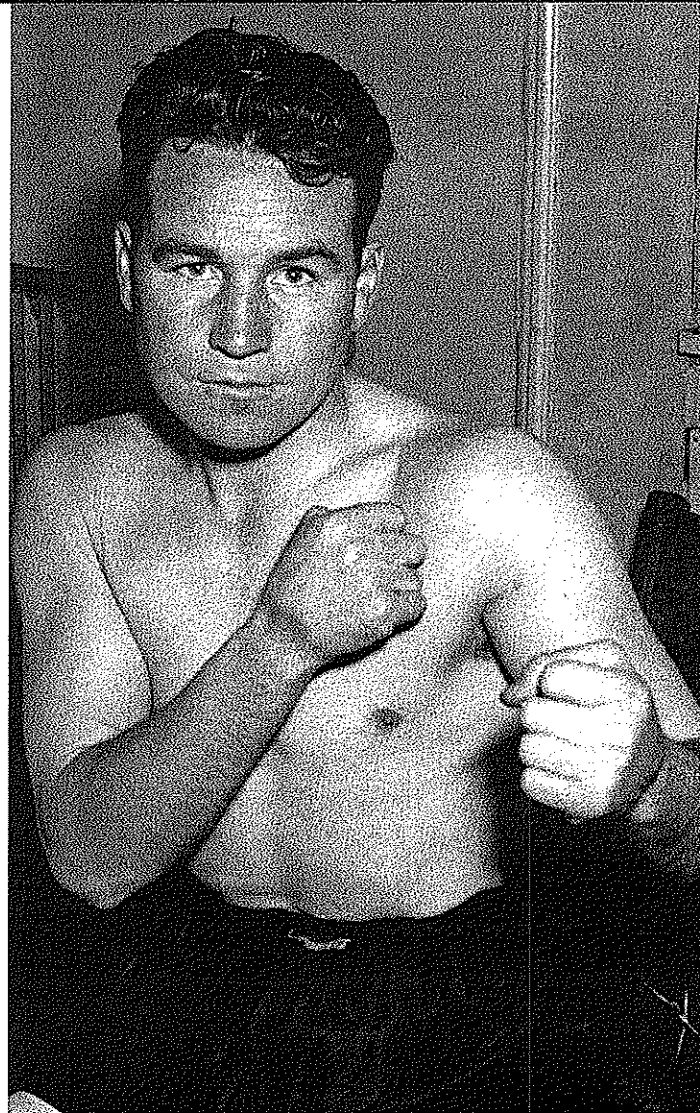
Sadly boxing's happy endings are few and far between, but the life and career of two-time welterweight champion Jimmy McLarnin was one of the most notable exceptions to that rule

Anyone wishing to disprove the adage that nice guys never finish first need look no further than the case of Jimmy "Babyface" McLarnin. The toast of New York in the late 1920s and early 1930s, McLarnin earned unprecedented sums of money for a fighter in the lighter weight divisions, was twice welterweight champion of the world, and then retired, health and wealth intact, to a life of ease and endless rounds of golf with his Hollywood buddies before finally passing away in 2004 at the age of 96. McLarnin's success, as recounted by Andrew Gallimore in *Babyface Goes to Hollywood*, was the result of hard work and a stubborn refusal to view boxing as anything other than a means to an end, with even the world title viewed only in light of how it might affect the fighter's box-office standing. But even so, one cannot help be amazed at how well everything seemed to fall into place for McLarnin, right from the moment he was first informed, as a skinny 12-year-old in Vancouver, that he could one day be champion of the world.

That improbable prediction was delivered by Charles "Pop" Foster, a Liverpudlian veteran of British boxing booths who proved the sort of manager one would find incredible if encountered in a work of fiction. Shrewd, clear-sighted and loyal beyond belief, Foster helped McLarnin become a headline act on the West Coast before steering him through the minefield of crooks, conmen and chancers that

comprised boxing in Depression-era New York. To Foster, McLarnin's welfare, both physical and financial, was paramount, and if promoters and rival managers were offended by his insistence on securing the best possible deal for his charge then that was most assuredly their problem, not his. On top of those qualities, which should be mandatory for any manager worth his salt, Foster also refused to take a cut of McLarnin's purses until the latter had amassed \$25,000 in the bank, and even then opted to take a percentage significantly smaller than the customary third.

Good fortune smiled on McLarnin in other ways as well. His arrival in New York in 1928 coincided with the decline in heavyweight boxing which followed the retirement of Gene Tunney, and promoter Tex Rickard was only too delighted to invest in a fighter whose successful battles with the leading Jewish boxers of the day were guaranteed to keep the turnstiles spinning, while at the same time earning the hard-hitting McLarnin such charming soubriquets as "the Jew Killer" and "the Hebrew Scourge". In addition, McLarnin's friendship with Mayor Jimmy Walker and that of Foster with gangster Owney Madden (a fellow-denizen of Merseyside) seem to have shielded the pair from what the fighter termed "those strangely prosperous little men who hang around gyms". Even the Great Depression couldn't touch McLarnin; two days before



LADY LUCK SMILED on McLarnin more than once is his colourful career

the Bank of the United States collapsed, he withdrew his savings of \$65,000 and headed back to his family in Vancouver. And when, in later years, McLarnin's bank balance took a beating from failed business ventures, he found himself the beneficiary, to the tune of some \$200,000, of "Pop" Foster's last will and testament.

Despite a title designed less for elegance than for maximising internet search "hits", *Babyface Goes to Hollywood: Fighters, Mobsters & Film Stars — The Jimmy McLarnin Story* (The O'Brien Press, £10.99) is a well-written and well-researched account of one of the more interesting yet neglected stars of world boxing, and in particular his unique relationship with "Pop" Foster. For some reason, the opening chapter is designated as a prologue, even though it's nothing of the sort, and as someone who has been caught

out by the false assertion that McLarnin's second name was Archibald, I would have preferred this sort of basic detail to have been dealt with in its proper place, rather than appearing as an aside much later in the book. I would also have appreciated a little more detail on McLarnin's family background in the north of Ireland: does, for instance, the fact that McLarnin was "brought up a Methodist by his mother" mean that his parents were from different sides of the religious divide? Indeed, considering that Mr Gallimore has also made a film of the same title (shown recently on Setanta Ireland), a stronger authorial presence would have been welcome, but these, however, are minor quibbles. Containing 32 photos, a ring record and index, *Babyface Goes to Hollywood* can be strongly recommended to both the pugilist-specialist-reader and casual fan alike.