Disappearance: How Shifting Gendered Boundaries Motivated the Removal of Eighteenth Century Boxing Champion Elizabeth Wilkinson from Historical Memory

Christopher Thrasher

Abstract

In the eighteenth century, one fighter’s reputation outshone all others. She was Elizabeth Wilkinson, a bare-knuckled, trash talking, knife wielding, European boxing champion. Both throughout her life and a century and a half thereafter, writers heaped praise at her feet. She provided a point of imperial pride for authors that pointed to her as proof that the British of both genders were strong and brave. This began to change at the end of the nineteenth century. As the British Empire seemed in danger of collapse and the American economy shifted unpredictably, men on both sides of the Atlantic basin began to redefine their masculinity. They embraced a new form of passionate manhood that judged men as lovers, athletes, and for their ability to give and withstand pain in the boxing ring. Boxing, which had long been British regardless of gender, now became male, regardless of nationality. Men built a mythical past for boxing that ignored Wilkinson and crowned one of her contemporaries, James Figg, the sport’s first champion.

Full Text: PDF

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.21971/P7SK56

Disappearance: How shifting gendered boundaries motivated the removal of eighteenth century boxing champion Elizabeth Wilkinson from historical memory