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Mendoza the Jew: Boxing, Manliness and Nationalism

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Perhaps you have heard this story before. A member of an ethnic minority grows up on the rough side of town. Prejudice and lack of financial resources limit his opportunities in life, but he soon discovers that he has athletic abilities, and that people are willing to pay to watch him perform. His sport offers him the chance to earn more money than he could have dreamed of and to socialize with the rich and famous. He becomes a star, a household name, the object of intense media attention, and a hero to members of his ethnic group, who see him as a symbol of their hope to escape poverty and degradation. He is also a symbol of his country, since his fellow citizens see his sport as embodying the nation and its values—strength, determination, courage—and many are willing to overlook the fact that he is, well, different. Yet he has many detractors, some of whom are motivated by envy or prejudice; they wait for him to slip up, and they are happy when it turns out that he is not a model of virtue. He lives lavishly, spends more quickly than he earns, and gets into trouble with the law. Eventually he doesn’t even have the distinction of being criticized, as the fickle media turn their attention elsewhere and our former sports star descends into obscurity.

This is the story of many professional athletes in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Yet it is also the story of Daniel Mendoza, a British boxing champion who fought over 200 years ago. Born in the East End of London in 1765 to Jewish parents of limited means, Daniel grew up in a difficult environment. Faced with prejudice of his non-Jewish neighbors, he responded to anti-Semitic taunts with his fists. Soon his reputation as a boxer spread, and he obtained opportunities to fight for prize money. By the end of the 1780s he had become a star. Thousands of spectators paid to watch his matches—and to bet on the outcome—and thousands more read about his bouts in the newspapers. He was one of the very first national sports heroes, both in the sense of being famous outside his city of origin and in the sense of symbolizing a sport that many regarded as particular to their “nation.” Boxing fans often claimed that their sport was essentially British. Unlike the French, who reputedly settled their disputes...
by dueling with swords or pistols, the British had (in the words of boxing enthusiasts) a more "natural" and "manly" way of defending their honor by using their fists. Paradoxically, an outsider, a Jew with a Hispanic name, came to epitomize a "British" sport. Many of his coreligionists became his pupils, and a generation of Jewish boxers, now largely forgotten, carried on the tradition that Mendoza started. Yet Mendoza was only human, and he succumbed to the temptations of sudden wealth and fame. He spent beyond his means and repeatedly found himself in legal trouble. Meanwhile his fair-weather friends disappeared and his adversaries gloated over his misfortunes.

Why should Mendoza's story matter to us today? To begin with, it sheds light on the origins of celebrity sports culture, which began in eighteenth-century Britain and has been with us for more than two centuries. It reveals another legacy of the century that is normally viewed from a different angle: nationalism. Historians typically study nationalism in terms of learned treatises and political speeches, whereas eighteenth-century British boxing shows us how ideas and emotions regarding the "nation" permeated the practices of everyday life. Moreover, Mendoza's story reveals ambivalent attitudes of a society towards its minorities, who were often in danger and injury in athletic contests but whose social mobility was limited and precarious. We might rightly ask, to what extent is our society different? Finally, Mendoza's story is relevant to our understanding of gender, or how ideas about what is "manly" or "effeminate" define a particular society's values and power relations. When supporters of boxing praised their sport as manly, or when a boxer questioned the "manliness" of his opponent's behavior, they implicitly relegated all "effeminate" people to the margins of society and deemed them unfit for respect. This was not an inevitable way of dividing up the world, though it is largely with us still.

Mendoza the Jew is divided into five parts, each with its own purpose. Part I is a graphic history. It relates the narrative of Mendoza's life and career, with particular emphasis on the boxer's rivalry with Richard Humphries. It is the product of my collaboration with graphic artist Liz Clarke, who has taken the story and text I assembled from historical sources and infused it with beautiful images that evoke emotion and action. A work in its own right, the graphic history can be read on its own, but I hope you will not stop there.

Part II consists of primary sources—in other words, original sources from the period under consideration. These sources give you a deeper understanding of the story told in Part I. They will transport you directly into Mendoza's world. They will also enable you to question and critique the graphic history by comparing it to the sources on which it is based.

Reading them will give you the tools to engage in the same kind of historical analysis that professional historians engage in.

Part III provides you with the historical context to enrich your understanding of both the graphic history and the primary sources. It gives you information about the history of the Jews in eighteenth-century Britain, prejudice and tolerance in British society, the rise of spectator sports, the history of boxing in particular, and developments in the history of nationalism and gender.

Part IV is an account of the process by which Liz and I produced the book you are reading. It is meant to give you a still clearer sense of how the discipline of history works.

Part V consists of suggested writing assignments that enable you to "be your own historian" by interpreting the primary sources and critiquing the graphic history. It is written with the conviction that you truly understand how a work of history is produced only when you begin to make one for yourself.

Taken together, the five parts function as a lesson in historical methodology. When you are finished with this book, you will have not only a deeper understanding of the issues outlined in the previous paragraph (e.g., the history of celebrity sports culture, prejudice and tolerance, nationalism, and gender), but also a deeper understanding of how the discipline of history works.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to many people who have played a role in the making of this book. Liz Clarke has not only amazed me with her stunning artwork, she has also helped me focus and clarify my ideas and saved me from more than one embarrassing error. Karlyn Hixson, the Oxford University Press representative for Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, DC, stimulated my interest in the graphic history form by introducing me to Abina and the Important Men, which inspired me to begin work on Mendoza the Jew. Charles Cavaliere, editor for world history textbooks at OUP, believed in this project from the beginning and has played a role in every phase of its development. He has carefully read every word, examined every image, and given unfailingly sage advice on everything from the fonts we have used to the cover design. The following reviewers took time out of their busy schedules to evaluate the proposal for this book: Abel A. Alves, Ball State University; David A. Bell, Princeton University; Dean Bell, Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies; Rafe Blaufarb, Florida State University; Robert Bond, San Diego Mesa College; Robert Brennan, Cape Fear Community College; David M. Kalivas, Middlesex Community College; John Moser, Ashland University; Mark Edward Ruff, Saint Louis University; Annmarie Sammartino, Oberlin College; Victoria E. Thompson, Arizona State University; Janet M. C. Walsmsley, George Mason University; and Molly A. Warsh, University of Pittsburgh.

Once the text and artwork were submitted, Keith Failre efficiently shepherded the book through its many stages of production. I was fortunate to have Mary Anne Shahidi as my eagle-eyed copyeditor and the talented Michele Laseau and Bonni Leon-Berman as the book’s designers. At the College of William and Mary I had the good fortune to work with Kathleen DeLaurenti, an exceptional reference librarian who helped me find and organize visual materials from the eighteenth century, and Sagra Alvarado, an outstanding research assistant who made my work easier by transcribing often barely legible articles about Mendoza from the 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers database. Computer wizard Pablo Yañez found the fonts that we used in the graphic history when
quoting Mendoza’s memoirs and an eighteenth-century newspaper. Friends and colleagues too numerous to name read selections of the book in progress and offered comments and encouragement. I have also been fortunate to have the support of my family. My spouse, Ute Schechter, cheerfully indulged my unexpected preoccupation with boxing, even to the point of watching boxing movies with me. My son, Arthur Schechter, took an early interest in this book and asked me on many occasions, “How’s Mendoza?” My mother, Marilyn Schechter, took me to the Muhammad Ali Museum in my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, and relayed the tantalizing (but as yet undocumented) story that my great-grandmother’s cousin was Max Baer, a Jewish boxing champion from another time and place.
CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF A BOXER
BARNET COMMON, A FIELD NORTH OF LONDON. APRIL 19, 1787.

Daniel Mendoza was from a Jewish neighborhood in working-class East London, known simply as "Mendoza the Jew." He was one of Britain's most promising boxers.

Sam Martin was a butcher from the City of Bath, England and as a boxer was ranked number two in Britain. In this match sets were in his favor by a two-to-one margin.

Martin was strong and threw frequent punches, but Mendoza was quicker and more agile. He could avoid or block punches, and then, when his opponent was off-balance... he delivered a short, powerful blow to the gut, often following up... with a punishing punch to the face.
Aaron's parents, Abraham and Esther, were born in London in 1620. This is what Aaron wrote about his parents in his memoir:

"My parents, who were of the Jewish persuasion, were by no means in affluence circumstances. And though their family was large, they contrived to become a tolerable education on all of their children—they truly conceived this to be one object of the highest importance, as it concerned their future welfare in life, and therefore used every effort to ensure its accomplishment."

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, many Jews moved to London to escape religious persecution in the Netherlands and Spain. They were not welcome, and often met with violence and discrimination. However, some Jews managed to carve out a place for themselves in the city, and over time, London became a center for Jewish culture and community.
Whenever I returned home with a black eye, or any external mark of violence, my father never failed to inquire strictly into the cause, and would reprove me severely when it appeared I had involuntarily, wantonly, in a quarrel, but on the other hand, if he found I had acted only in self-defence, or from any justifiable motive, he would freely forgive me, and declare he would never exert any paternal authority to prevent me from standing to my own defence, when warmly assailed, being well aware that courage is not only useful, but almost indispensably necessary to carry us through life.

Having one day taken the liberty of remonstrating with him on the subject, hoping thereby to induce him to amend his conduct, I found that, so far from such being the effect, he became highly exasperated at my presumption, as he was pleased to term it, and made use of such violent threats, that I determined no longer to submit, and therefore gave him a severe thrashing (though in his father's house), and having done so, thought it prudent to imitate the manners of the great — I resigned my situation, to avoid being turned out.
... having learnt that one of our party had, but a few weeks previous to this, lost his life in or off play with some remote officers, I quitted my employment as dawnt, having remained therein only four or five days."

"Mr. Humphreys was... my second on this occasion; and when some of the spectators called out to him to direct me whither to strike, I told them leaving him reply, "there is no need of it, she had leisure, you and to all."

"I had never before fought for money, and felt some reluctance to a battle of that sort on the present occasion; however, as my friend had made the match, I was unwilling to disappoint him, and therefore resolved to use my utmost exertions in his favor."

"Accordingly, at the time appointed, I met my opponent, and... had to contend against superior strength; but, after a posterior which lasted one an hour, had the satisfaction to... come off victorious."

"The enemy must be killed, or... the case off victorious."

YOU'RE MY HERO, D'ARCY.