Davies, Lawrence. *The Story of Welsh Boxing: Prize Fighters of Wales*. Sussex: Pitch Publishing, 2019. Ii + 323 pp. Illustrations, Notes, Appendices, Bibliography. Reviewed by Daniel Taradash, Holocaust and Intolerance Museum of New Mexico.

Lawrence Davies’ meticulous study of the history of prizefighting in Welsh history and culture not only brings the fighters and their exploits to life in vivid detail, but also invites the reader into the worlds and minds of those who made the Welsh fight game possible. One aspect of his research that may prove surprising but noteworthy to those who are new to the history of prizefighting is its evolution from contests involving weapons such as swords and cudgels, to hand to hand combat that combined both boxing and some aspects of wrestling. Yet it is in the prizefights and personalities of the late 18th and early 19th century that the book truly comes to life. While the book revisits such old friends as Tom Molineaux, Daniel Mendoza, and Tom Cribb, we are also introduced to a fresh crop of colorful Welsh fighters. The exploits of fighters like Ned Turner (the “Out and Outer”), “Ironface” Jack Rasher, and the Savage brothers Bill and Ned paint a picture of Welsh prizefighting in both its glory and infamy.

The strange and somewhat pitiful saga of the Savage brothers is particularly noteworthy, as their lack of skill and courage helped to drive them into ring obscurity. However, it rings clear that their failure to adhere to Welsh notions of pugilistic “manliness” proved to be just as devastating to their reputations as their failures in the ring. What the failures of the brothers, and the reactions of the fans to those failures demonstrate, is that pugilists in Welsh society were not only valued for their physical prowess, but were expected to demonstrate the best of what it meant to be both a true fighter and a true Welshman, a task at which both brothers appear to have fallen short on a number of occasions.

As for the fights themselves, Davies’ re-creations of these events immediately conveys to the reader that boxing matches were not just random collections of violent, drunk, aggressive men being egged on by bloodthirsty townsfolk. Rather, they were calculated, deliberate contests that involved extensive planning and preparation among fighters, officials and gamblers that were designed to test not only the fighter’s skill and physical conditioning, but also their understandings of Welsh manhood in the 18th and 19th century. We see that the fighters, their fans, and backers valued the ability of Welsh fighters to not just withstand physical pain and exhaustion, but also the dedication to their craft, as fighters who did nothing more than bludgeon and maul their opponents were often viewed less favorably than their more scientific counterparts.

One aspect of the ring experience that Davies illustrates well was how Welsh fighters and fight fans understood time when it was applied to boxing in their context. Because rounds would not end until a fighter was either knocked down or fell down (intentionally going down was known as “seeking the grass”), fights during this era routinely lasted for 50 rounds or more, often exceeding an hour and a half. For those fights that ended too early, even if one fighter were soundly beaten, his toughness and conditioning were called into questioning. For those who fought on for extended periods, they were characterized as demonstrating characteristics of a true Welsh champion, be it in victory or defeat.

An additional strength of Davies’ work is his ability to recreate the larger society that surrounded the world of the pugilists. Students of history and contemporary fight fans will enjoy Davies’ explanation of the role played by the “fancy” men of the sporting fraternity in not only arranging for purses between fighters, but their roles as prizefightings earliest matchmakers and informal managers. Their actions, skill and cunning in promoting and prizefights is all the more impressive when we learn that they were forced to operate around and in spite of law enforcement officials in spaces where prizefights were banned.

Another window into what the lives and adventures of Welsh fighters meant to their fellow countrymen can be found in the appendices that contain the songs and poems sung in the inns and public houses recalling the exploits of their favorite heroes. Some offer eulogies to fallen fighters, while others memorialize heroic contests between their most favored champions. But in each of these brief oral histories, we are treated to a deeper understanding of the sense of identity and pride that the sport of prizefighting brought to so many communities. And, for those readers who are entirely unfamiliar with either 19th century Welsh vernacular, 19th century Welsh boxing vernacular, or both, a glossary of pugilistic terms can be found at the end of the book, which may be helpful for those readers unfamiliar with expressions like facer (“A straight, violent blow to the face”), purring (“Shin kicking in an attempt to wrestle an opponent to the ground”) suit of mourning (“A pair of black eyes”), knowledge box (“The head”), or love (“Nothing”).

As accounts from sporting periodicals and newspapers such as *Bell’s Life, Sporting Magazine, Dublin Evening Post* and *The Cambrian* and others attest, the Welsh society at large held true fighters in high esteem, regardless of the outcome of the contest. For those who either could not or would not come to “scratch,” (return to fighting after a knockdown or stoppage) either in the ring or outside of it, they faced scorn and ridicule not only from the fans and press, but also from their fellow fighters. What Davies research, analysis and presentation leaves us with is a thoughtful and penetrating look into the worlds of not just Welsh prizefighters, but the worlds of the individuals that surrounded the world of pugilism as well. These interactions reveal a part of Welsh life that may have been powered largely by the athletes and other members of the sporting community, but was understood, acknowledged and respected by those both inside and outside of the pugilistic fraternity.