

SONNY BOY: The Life and Strife of Sonny Liston - Rob Steen (Methuen,1993)

"Man of Mystery" would have been an equally appropriate title. Charles "Sonny" Liston is the heavyweight champion about whom we know least - it's not certain when he was born (he claimed 1932 but few believed him) or when, how or why he died. Nor will we ever know what really happened in his fights with Muhammad Ali. His precise involvement with organised crime is another mystery.

It would seem that Liston was to some extent unfairly maligned; the general image of an illiterate mob-controlled thug and bully "ain't necessarily so". He was described by Jose Torres as the most intelligent fighter he'd ever known and by his ex-assistant warden at Jefferson City prison as a "solid, reliable bloke...good quiet inmate, no kind of bully at all"; it seems that his sole involvement in violence there was when he flattened three white gang leaders who'd been victimising blacks. Later, a neighbour described him as "a pleasure to have as a neighbour...inconspicuous and quiet". His friend Davey Read described him as "A loner...didn't trust many people.. didn't blame him." Few people would; Liston started out as the 24th. of 25 children of a sharecropper, then drifted into first juvenile crime and then three years in jail described by a cop as "the best thing that ever happened to him...if he hadn't learned to box, he'd be dead of a bullet in the back." He took up boxing and got married there; on his release, he found it, in the words of his first manager, "hard to keep...job...ex-con." He was hired to keep order among labourers by gangster John Vitale and turned professional after having the best of sparring with top contender Nino Valdes.

A promising career was interrupted in 1956; precisely what led to a policeman's being left unconscious with a smashed knee and seven-stitch gash depends on who you believe. A jury's believing the policeman led to Liston receiving a nine-month jail sentence - which seems to indicate that his manager had contacts, as a black ex-con in St. Louis beating up a policeman could have expected to have the proverbial book thrown at him.

After his release, the police of several cities made up for it; in the words of a St. Louis policeman "WE wanted to break up Liston's associations with hoodlums. Every time we could pick him up...we did." Later, in Philadelphia, his "photo was taped to the sun visor of every squad car in the city". He did, admittedly, sign a five-year contract with the notorious Blinky Palermo in 1958; the actual shares were 52% to gangster and ex-hit man Frankie Carbo, 24% to Pep Barone, 12% each to Palermo and Vitale - four men who could probably have compiled a guide to organised crime from their own experiences.

Inside the ring, his only problem was that, in the words of "Ring" reporter Ted Carroll, "Managers do a disappearing act when Liston's name is brought up as an opponent." Those who would fight him fell to him; hard-hitting and equally durable, he flattened all his opponents with the exception of Eddie Machen, who shamelessly and wisely only came to survive. Foremost of the aforesaid managers was Cos D'Amato, manager of heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson; when they eventually did meet, of course, Patterson failed to survive the first round on both occasions.

However, his becoming world champion didn't mean a fresh start; New York, despite Carbo's being safely in jail from 1961 onwards, always denied him a licence. The IRS seized the receipts from his title-winning fight and took their time about returning them. Philadelphia sent nobody from City Hall to meet him - so he moved, unavailingly, to Denver with the words "I'd rather be a lamppost in Denver than Mayor of Philadelphia."

His fights with Ali are covered without any definite conclusion - it seems that he was poorly trained for the first and seems to have left his fight in the gym in the second. Mike Tyson's ex-manager Bill Cayton said of his claimed shoulder injury "watch the tapes...couldn't throw his left at all." What exactly caused his

first-round collapse in the 1965 fiasco we'll never know; drugs, threatened assassination, a dive have all been suggested. What is certain is that referee Jersey Joe Walcott's performance was the worst in boxing history.

Liston made a successful comeback until, probably one fight away from a title shot, he lost to Leotis Martin (whose career was ironically ended by an eye injury sustained against Liston) in 1969. He won one more fight - and died between Christmas Eve 1970 and January 5, 1971, when he was found dead by his wife. The coroner's verdict was natural causes; other theories have included a drug overdose, either accidental (his wife denied he'd ever taken them) or on purpose - suspects including the Black Muslims and the Mafia, motives being either he'd been working as a debt collector and wanted too much, he'd reneged on an agreement to throw his last fight to Chuck Wepner (a TV Investigation found no evidence for this), he'd annoyed a powerful Mafia boss (he certainly once clashed with Cleveland king-pin Moe Dalitz) or he was going to tell the truth about the Ali fights. Certainly, he'd been ripped off financially; whatever happened to the millions he'd made in the ring, his wife certainly didn't inherit them.

The book is well-written and never dull; however, I can't recommend it. Not only is it full of errors but I would like to tell Mr. Steen that readers of boxing books can do without anti-boxing diatribes and philosophising.