

## **Jack Johnson** *Two Early Drafts*

*My work on this long and complex poem, which is predicated on the question of what, if any, similarities existed between my father and the person he was named after, the black American pugilist, Jack Johnson, proved a wellspring for dark childhood memories, reflected in the second extract below, in marked contrast with the legend of 'Jack o' the Ring', a man who rose above the institutionalized racialism of early Twentieth Century America, and was one of the key role models for black emancipation. Accounts of his fights as well as accounts of his life vary in detail, and an additional problem for the poet is form—how best to record the major boxing matches of his life. Originally I conceived them as a sonnet sequence, as if they were choreographed like miniature ballets, soon thought better of it, then considered the style of Robert W. Service in 'The Shooting of Dan McGrew', and even sooner thought better of that. In the end I decided to go principally with Johnson's own accounts, with the rhyming couplet signalling that this is closer to polished legend than rough factualism.*

### **Johnson vs the champion Tommy Burns, December 26th 1908** *Preliminary Sketch*

Jack chases Tommy all over the world  
But Burns's paths just twisted and twirled  
From London to Paris, before Jack sails  
From London again now to New South Wales.  
Burns, he thinks, hides out in Australia  
Rather than risk being proved a failure.  
Jack corners Burns, demands satisfaction,  
And at last the challenger sees some action:  
Burns calls Jack *yeller* straight to his face,  
Spits on the ground, insulting his race,  
Offers him five gees, himself thirty-five:  
More attractive, may be, to take a dive  
Than slog it out for round upon round.  
And when it turns out no ref can be found  
Jack bravely allows it to be right  
That Burns' promoter friend should judge the fight.  
On the eve of the bout Burns grabs a chair,  
Sets out to brain Jack right then and there.

He fails, and Johnson keeps faith with the date  
Of Boxing Day, nineteen hundred and eight.

Round One begins, and blow follows blow;  
Jack pulling punches coolly masters his foe,  
Like a cat which slaps squirming mice for fun  
Or kids who tease Jumbo with a cream bun.  
In the very next round he throws out a cross  
Which lets Tommy know who's the new boss,  
Turns on the verbal as only Jack can—  
*Why don't you get up, fight like a real man?*  
*This won't last much longer, poor little boy—*  
As he carelessly plays him, a pup with a toy.  
Among the white faces Jack spots a black lad  
Perched on a hick'ry fence and barely clad,  
Who shadows Jack's moves, a young Galahad,  
As blow by blow he takes on Burns,  
Dodges and parries the hits in turns,  
Punching uncannily in the right place;  
And as the *Jack o' the Ring* increases the pace,  
Leading left-rights brisk to body and face,  
Without warning Jack makes a low duck  
And the native boy now despite his pluck  
Bends too far from the fence, falls to the ground  
And, broke from his trance, emits such a sound  
That Jack suddenly stops and guffaws so loud  
It electrifies Burns along with the crowd.  
*He mentally outfought me, Jack was to state,*  
*Becoming a touchstone for Burns's fate,*  
*And for White Fang London watching the while*  
*My laugh forged my trademark, the Golden Smile.*

In masterful charge by Rounds Nine and Ten  
Jack eases off Burns till the Fourteenth, when  
It comes to him to go in for the kill;  
But the police inspector reads his will  
And knowing Burns has had his full money's worth,  
He stops the fight, grimly bereft of mirth,  
Mutters, *Enough now, Jack. Go bother Perth.*

### **The House that Jack Built** *Draft 1*

In the haunted house in Stump Cross woods  
Where the gliding wraith appeared on the stairs;  
Where the evil dwarfs camped under his bed;  
By the weeping wall of the shadow-cast witch  
With the nameless thing in the coal-hole dank;  
Where ghost mice scuttled and silverfish hid  
And blacklocks click-clacked the sluggish time;  
Where bare existence was so cold cold cold,  
Here in the house that Jack built.

And he hammered him down with stone mason blows  
For every wrong cut he'd chiselled in stone;  
For every skewed tack he'd knocked into a shoe  
Brayed him with the bangs from leather to awl—  
Brayed him the more the more he'd bawl,  
Brayed him so sure he could hardly crawl.  
And when he saw he had nowt to utter  
He was prompted then to double the batter  
And say, *Think on, tha's as soft as butter*  
*And mind tha deserves a real good clatter,*

*Here in the house that I built.*

Whenever it struck him t'lad cost too much,  
Or pained him sore that he had nowt left to teach;  
Whenever t'lad seemed to side with his Mum,  
He beat with the same blows he daily gave  
To the insensate faces of fossil stone  
And to the long dead beasts that dwelt within.  
But he was glad to explain the reasons why,  
Being, he thought, the reasonable kind:  
*To teach thee a lesson for thi own good  
To give thee a chance to grow into a man.  
Because tha's as soft as a wet bit of tripe;  
Because tha's as soft as a boiled rice pud.*  
And he pinned him hard in screams to the wall,  
Beat him with each blow that life rained on him  
For not fulfilling his own father's hopes  
To rise up as saviour to kith and to kin.  
And when he was beat he gave him some more—  
*For God's sake, Jack, you'll kill him, please stop—*  
And hour on hour the boy cried on the stairs,  
Lost in dark seas with no port for home,  
Empty below with no stars up above,  
Searching horizons for some speck of hope,  
Searching the depths for some sign of love;  
From here, in the house that Jack built.