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***Tommy Burns: Canada's Unknown World  
Heavyweight Champion.***

**Dan McCaffery.**  
**Toronto, ON: James Lorimer, 2000.**  
**268 pp., cloth, \$29.95.**  
**ISBN 1-55028-697-8.**

**Subject Headings:**  
**Burns, Tommy, 1881-1955.**  
**Boxers (Sports)-Canada-Biography.**

**Grades 9 and up / Ages 14 and up.**

**Review by Dave Jenkinson.**

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**excerpt:**

*Within a generation Burns was all but forgotten, even in Canada. When he died in 1955, only four people attended his burial, and he was interred in an unmarked pauper's grave. Canada's sad tradition of ignoring its heroes had been taken to a shameful extreme.*

An author of books on aviation history and an editor and journalist with the *Sarnia Observer*, McCaffery became interested in the story of Tommy Burns as the result of an interview he did with Muhammad Ali in 1974. As the book's title suggests, McCaffery seeks to make Canadians aware of one of the country's forgotten heroes, our first and only world heavyweight boxing champion. At the same time, McCaffery seeks to rehabilitate Burns' reputation which was "trashed" by American sports writers of the time who objected to the fact that, unlike most white fighters of the day, Burns would not honour the colour bar. As he said, "You're not a real contender if you duck a man because of his colour." Just 5 foot, 7 inches tall, and weighing about 170 lbs, Burns was a middleweight by today's standards, but he held the world championship for two years and 10 months, defending it 14 times, before losing it to a black man, Jack Johnson, in a fight staged in Australia, fittingly on Boxing Day, December, 1908. McCaffery argues that the American sports writing fraternity, unable to acknowledge that a black man was superior to a white, concocted the fiction that Burns was a substandard champion. He further posits that their biased version of boxing history has been repeated through the years by others who have unquestioningly accepted it.

Like most biographies, this one uses a chronological approach, beginning with Burns' birth on June 17, 1881, in a log cabin just outside Hanover, Ontario, and concluding in 1961, five years after Burns' death, when, as the result of fundraising efforts begun by a Vancouver sports writer, Dick Beddoes, a memorial plaque was finally placed on Burns' Vancouver grave. In fact, Tommy Burns was really Noah Brusso, the twelfth of 13 children. Taken out of school at age 10 and put into the workforce, Brusso, at 19, became a prizefighter in the United States. Because his mother objected to his boxing, he assumed the Irish sounding name of Tommy Burns in a futile attempt to hide his activities from her. Understandably, most of the book's contents focus on the pugilistic aspects of Burns' life, but McCaffery does not ignore Burns' personal life. A particularly positive aspect of the book is that, in his attempt to rehabilitate Burns, McCaffery does not paint Burns as a paragon, and he includes some of Burns' character "warts." The final chapter, "Shortchanged by History," is where McCaffery marshals his evidence to assign Burns his "true" ranking in the listing of world heavyweight boxing champions.

McCaffery's writing style is quite lively, and he makes liberal use of quotes, both from people and documents, including Burns' unpublished biography. *Tommy Burns*, which is well illustrated throughout with black and white photos, concludes with a listing of all of Tommy Burns' 70 bouts, 63 as a professional, and their outcomes, a listing of "Sources," "Notes" which acknowledge the sources of direct quotes, and an Index.

Though *Tommy Burns* will likely more often be found as part of adult collections, it does merit consideration as a purchase for high school libraries where its contents can contribute to studies of Canadian social history.

**Highly Recommended.**

*Dave Jenkinson teaches courses in YA literature in the Faculty of Education, the University of Manitoba.*

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