



Gene Tunney beat Jack Dempsey in 1926 to become the heavyweight boxing champion of the world

World boxing champion Gene Tunney and writer George Bernard Shaw forged a most unlikely – but remarkably enduring – friendship, writes **Patrick Myler**

THE BOXER & the playwright

For sure, it was an unusual relationship. Few understood what a world heavyweight boxing champion and a Nobel Prize-winning playwright could have in common, apart maybe from their Irishness.

Yet Gene Tunney and George Bernard Shaw enjoyed a remarkable 30-year close bond, fostered by a mutual love of literature, music, art – and boxing – that only ended with Shaw's death in 1950 at the age of 94.

"I have never been given to close personal friendships, as you know, and Gene Tunney is among the few for whom I have established a warm affection," GBS wrote of the man 40 years his junior. "I enjoy his company as I have of few men."

Tunney described their closeness as "one of the most precious gifts that fortune allowed me. I am proud to have known him".

Connecticut-based Jay R Tunney, one of the boxer's four children, is coming to Dublin to deliver a talk at UCD on May 31 as part of the 'GB Shaw: Back in Town' conference, co-sponsored by UCD Humanities Institute and the International Shaw Society.

He is also promoting his book 'The Prizefighter and the Playwright: Gene Tunney and Bernard Shaw'.

Jay, who at 75 has the same handsome looks and the strong head of hair that his father retained right up to his death at 81 in 1978, spoke about the bond between the prizefighter and the Dublin-born writer.

"Dad was the son of a New York stevedore from Co Mayo and left school at 15, but he resolved to educate himself by reading the works of writers like Shakespeare, Butler, Shelley, Maugham and Shaw," he explained.

"Often he would reread the books and poems over and over until he fully understood their meaning. He wasn't trying to show he was better than others, but he made it clear he wanted to better himself. Writers

like Shaw came to understand what he was trying to do and saw how genuine he was."

Gene admired and befriended a host of other writers and scholars, including Thornton Wilder and Ernest Hemingway, and once delivered a 45-minute lecture on Shakespeare, without notes, to students at Yale University.

Back in the 1920s, hardened fight fans and sports writers didn't know what to make of a boxing champion who was more often found with his head buried in a book than playing cards or engaging in the normal knockabout fun of training camps.

Accused of being a snob, he retorted: "If being a snob is about trying to improve my mind and learn anything I can from reading books and meeting writers and artists, then I am happy to be own up to being a snob."

However, his relationship with GBS didn't get off to the most promising start.

Tunney had been approached to star in a Hollywood movie based on Shaw's novel 'Cashel Byron's Profession', which was about an Irishman who becomes a world boxing champion, retires at his peak, marries and raises a family, enters business and runs successfully for a seat in the British Parliament.

The story would prove to be a remarkable parallel of Tunney's own life, an almost perfect example of life imitating art.

Gene retired as undefeated world heavyweight champion in 1929, married steel heiress Polly Lauder, served on the boards of more than a dozen companies, and was a guest at many a White House reception.

Unlike Cashel Byron, he didn't become an MP, but one of his sons, John, was a US Senator.

'Cashel Byron's Profession' never made it to the movie screen, mainly because its author feared his story would be 'butchered' by Hollywood scriptwriters. Tunney invited the author's wrath by publicly declaring that



Best pals: Gene Tunney loved writers such as Shelley, Shakespeare, and Shaw, left, with whom he became good friends

he didn't think much of the novel. Shaw, however, admitted he wasn't too proud of it either.

Shaw, who had made an unsuccessful bid to enter the English amateur boxing championships because of his lack of experience, followed Tunney's ring career from a distance, admiring a man who treated boxing as a science, not a brutal slugging match, and he was delighted when Gene toppled Jack Dempsey off the heavyweight throne in 1926.

They began to correspond – most of Shaw's letters to Tunney are held at Cornell University while the boxer's letters are in the British Museum – and would meet up many times over a 20-year period.

"Theirs was a symbiotic relationship," explained Jay R Tunney. "Gene was a young man and Shaw extended himself because it gave him pleasure and allowed him to relive a youth he thought was often wasted on the young. Gene, in a sense, was like the son Shaw never had."

"And we could say that Shaw was the father my dad never had [Tunney had a fraught relationship with his own strict disciplinarian father]. Shaw validated Dad's career, which was often looked down upon by society. Shaw's wisdom and intellect were great sources of inspiration for my dad and helped him redefine his goals for all the years to come after boxing."

The sincerity of the relationship was put to the ultimate test in 1929, when the recently retired champion suffered a greater crisis than he had ever experienced in the boxing ring, as his young bride came close to dying.

The newlyweds had been enjoying an idyllic holiday at Brioni, on the Adriatic coast, where Polly's mother had a rented villa.

Tunney had written to Shaw extolling the privacy of the resort, away from the meddling presence of reporters and photographers, and GBS was so impressed by what he was told that he asked if he and his wife Charlotte could join them. Tunney was delighted to welcome them.

The two men enjoyed long, uninterrupted walks along the shore, discussing writers and writing, and taking dips in the warm Adriatic Sea. That was until their blissful stay was shattered by Polly's sudden illness.

Suffering from acute appendicitis, her condition was considered too grave to be moved to the mainland.

It was only the chance arrival on holiday of two prominent German doctors, who, on hearing of the crisis, performed an immediate operation that undoubtedly saved her life.

Shaw, despite being under severe pressure from his publishers to meet a strict deadline, had refused to leave his friend's side and comforted Gene throughout his trauma until Polly recovered. She would go on to live beyond her 100th birthday.

The self-confessed atheist had sat in the tiny chapel on Brioni as Tunney, brought up by his Irish mother as a Catholic, prayed for his wife's recovery.

Afterwards, GBS was moved to admit that a miracle might indeed have happened.

"One of the most precious gifts that fortune allowed me was the friendship of George Bernard Shaw," said Tunney.

"In all our conversation and correspondence, I never knew him to say an offensive thing or to ever malign anyone's character or personality. I am proud to have known him." ☐

Jay R Tunney will give a talk at UCD on Thursday, May 31 as part of the 'GB Shaw: Back in Town' conference. 'The Prizefighter and the Playwright: Gene Tunney and Bernard Shaw', by Jay R Tunney, is out now. www.fireflybooks.com

Ask the Experts

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Q Hi Brian, I have just put down my new deck and I need to get it stained, but the weather is so unsettled at the moment what can you recommend?
Elaine, Limerick

A Hi Elaine, use Colortrend Transparent Wood stain, this is acrylic based so it will dry in 1-2 hours. It is available in 5 different colours, in 1ltr and 5ltr cans. Apply at least 2 coats, and if you can, a third coat. Enjoy the Irish summer!

Q I am tired of painting my outdoor furniture in the usual teal and pine colours and would like to try something different, maybe even a blue or a green! What can you recommend?
Patricia, Kilkenny

A Hi Patricia, why not try Romaseal Wood Trust Range, this is available in seven different, solid colours from blues and greens to yellows and reds. It's available in 750ml and 3.5ltr and dries to a lovely matt finish. Enjoy!

Q Hi Brian, I am just about to move into my new dream home, and money is tight! I would like the 'designer look' on my walls but at the moment I just can't afford it. What can I do?
Donal, Cork

A Hi Donal, here at Pat McDonnell's we have our own in-store Colour Consultants and they would be delighted to help you. Just contact your nearest store to make an appointment, and you can go through colours either in store or in your new home. And the best bit..... this service is completely free.

Q Hi Brian, I am just about to start painting the outside of my house and it's finished with a semi rough dash. What is the best roller sleeve to use on this?
Shane, Dundalk

A Hi Shane, I don't envy you with this job, but to make it easier I would use a 9" Corona Tuff Pro Extra Rough Sleeve. This is a quality American sleeve and has a very high density Nap on it, ideal for getting into your dash finish, and for holding more paint than a conventional roller sleeve.

Q Hi Brian, I am repainting the exterior of my home later this year. What is the best preparation?
Eamonn, Tralee

A Hi Eamonn, it depends on the condition of the surface - if it hasn't been done in a while I would recommend a fungicidal wash, Faebex Multi Surface Prep is ideal. This is applied to the surface by brush or spray, left to work, and then power washed off. Even if the surface doesn't look dirty I would still recommend power washing. Clean surfaces will result in greater paint adhesion subsequently. Allow surface to fully dry (1-2 days). Fill any cracks with a high quality exterior filler - I would recommend the Topseal exterior range. It is very important to fill any holes or cracks on the surface as over time water can get trapped here and cause problems later. Mask off any areas that you don't want painted i.e. Doors/Window Frames and use a drop/dust sheet to cover paths, garden beds etc. Now you're ready to start painting - good luck!

Q Hi Brian, I am about to repaint my kitchen units and I need to clean down the surface before I paint, what would you recommend?
Tony, Tralee

A Hi Tony, I always recommend Original Krod Kutter, this is a non-toxic, biodegradable product that cuts through grease, grime, oil, and even wax. Not only is it great for cleaning your kitchen surfaces, it's great for cleaning any surfaces in your home. It is available in 950ml spray and a 3.75ltr US Gallon.

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