Up against the Ropes

Peter Jackson As “Uncle Tom” in America

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When Peter Jackson, Australia’s heavyweight champion, arrived in America in 1888, he was known as “The Black Prince”; by the time he left for home, 12 years later, he was more often thought of as “Uncle Tom.” How this perfect fighting machine came to be identified with America’s well-known symbol of acquiescence is a story that illuminates the cultural, social, and racial environment of late 19th-century America. It is a narrative that features the highly commercial, image-conscious worlds of boxing and theatre against a background of extreme racial prejudice. Most importantly, it is a cautionary tale that reflects the dangerous and mutable ability of popular entertainments to endow damaging stereotypes with a semblance of truth.

Peter Jackson came to the United States looking for a fight. He was a determined, disciplined, and talented boxer who was optimistic that he could defeat America’s finest boxers. The battle that Jackson fought in America was one he was ill-equipped to fight, for it had little to do with his technical skill or physical prowess. It was a struggle against America’s long-standing racial schism, which divided Americans by the color of their skin. When Jackson, a novice to American culture, allowed his manager to convince him to be “whipped to death” nightly before packed houses as Uncle Tom in a touring production of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, his battle in America was all but over. Never again would he be taken seriously as a heavyweight contender. Literally and figuratively, Jackson had become America’s most famous Uncle Tom.

Other historians who have chronicled Jackson’s career in America have focused on his success in the boxing ring, his personal romances or, to a limited extent, his compromised position as a black boxer in America. Consequently, his career as an actor has been dismissed, if not altogether ignored, as an unrelated blip in the boxer’s life. Yet Jackson’s boxing experience in America was poignantly mirrored by the reception and treatment he received while playing Uncle Tom. The fact that his greatest moments of shame as a boxer came while he was also engaged in a role that many Americans viewed as humiliating cannot be dismissed as mere coincidence. The slow process of Jackson’s disillusionment—in the boxing ring, on the stage, and in American society—is intricately entangled in the complex web of race, ideology, and popular culture that weave the cloth of American society. By viewing Jackson’s boxing
and acting careers as a single continuum, the pieces of the story work together to illuminate the dilemma faced by a man who many believed should have been the World Heavyweight Champion.

**Round 1: Jackson Comes to America, 1888**

Born in the West Indies, Jackson immigrated to Australia with his parents as a young boy. Though his parents returned to their native St. Croix, Peter remained in Australia under the guidance of Clay Callahan, an American ship owner, who recognized the young boy’s physical talent. It was Callahan who introduced the teenage Peter Jackson to Larry Foley, a former championship prizefighter and the most renowned boxing instructor in Australia. Under Foley’s tutelage, Jackson gained the technical skills he needed to compliment his extraordinary athletic ability.

Jackson began his first professional bouts in 1882, at age 21, when he defeated Jack Hayes in a seven-round knockout after a previous match with

1. A portrait of Peter Jackson. (Referee 18 April 1900:7)

2. A poster advertises Peter Jackson’s 1893 performance as “Uncle Tom.” (Poster courtesy of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)
Peter Jackson As Uncle Tom
Hayes that had ended in a draw. To become the reigning Heavyweight Champion of Australia, Jackson demolished some of the sport’s most highly regarded boxers, including Sam Britten, Mick Dooley, and finally, Tom Lees, the title holder until his defeat by Jackson in 1886. It was during his rise to the top in Australia that Jackson first encountered discrimination, in the form of Jack Burke, the “Irish Lad,” who asserted he did not want to ruin his reputation by fighting a black boxer (Wiggins 1985:148). Faced with the intractability of Burke’s racism, and the lack of any other opponents of suitable caliber, Jackson elected to make the 9,000-mile journey to the United States.

Unfortunately for Jackson, the discrimination that he had experienced in Australia was mild compared with what greeted him in America. By 1888, Reconstruction backlash was reaching its height. Legally and socially, America’s black community was experiencing the harshest strictures to be imposed since slavery. Black Codes adopted after the war uniformly denied access and equality to black citizens. Particularly in the South, where the effects of the Civil War were the most personally felt and where the vast majority of African Americans lived, white fear fueled hatred for blacks. Lynchings, beatings, and other forms of violent behavior were tolerated by a white society that was growing increasingly anxious about losing dominance. Between 1885 and 1889, the number of lynchings of blacks increased by 64 percent over the previous five-year period (Christian 1995:271). Even in the more liberal north, social interaction between blacks and whites was virtually nonexistent.

There were few places where attitudes of racial animosity were more prevalent than in the boxing ring. Fueled by the articles and writings of prominent white intellectuals and scientists, who used social Darwinism to “prove” racial inferiority, boxing became a metaphor for the inevitable conflagration that would demonstrate Anglo-Saxon superiority over all others. With their sport described as a “true test of skill, courage, intelligence and manhood, boxing champions [...] stood as symbols of national and racial superiority” (Sammons 1988:31). The strength of this culturally embraced interpretation of boxing can be seen in the staunch color-line position that was routinely employed by white boxers. In the opinion of the editor of the New Orleans Times-Democrat, it was “a mistake to match a negro and a white man, a mistake to bring the races together on any terms of equality, even in the prize ring” (in Roberts 1983:18). By investing boxing with the status of an invincible proof of superiority, whites had made the stakes impossibly high. The meeting of black and white men in the ring was a racial showdown where whites had everything to lose and little to gain. The projected fear of the black community’s “gloating” over a white man’s defeat was too much for many whites to bear. The individual white boxer thus carried the weight of two pressing concerns: his fear over his own personal safety in a deadly sport, as well as his society’s collective fear of losing racial supremacy.

Conversely, as a symbol of victory over years of oppression and indignity, the black boxer who could bring a white man to his knees would be a hero to his racial community. Jackson’s arrival in America was greeted enthusiastically by the black community. According to biographer David Wiggins, he symbolized unbridled masculine aggression for a whole community of people who had been “taught to hold back and camouflage their normal [...] assertiveness” (1985:151). While watching Jackson in the ring, blacks could vicariously experience uninhibited aggression.

Despite his best efforts to break the color line, Jackson’s first significant fight with a white boxer did not happen until he had been in America for nearly nine months. On 28 December 1888, Jackson defeated Joe McAuliffe in a 24-round knock-out that embodied the worst of white fears, while the black community of San Francisco erupted in parades, celebrations, and an
outbreak of spontaneous partying. According to one local newspaper, the city’s black population had “not had such a jubilee since Mr. Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation” (in Wiggins 1985:152).

Not surprisingly, after his victory over McAuliffe, matches for Jackson against other white boxers were not forthcoming. After an unwelcome three-month layoff, Jackson defeated Irish American Patsy Cardiff handily in 10 rounds. By the summer of 1889, a frustrated Jackson set out for Chicago, hoping to attract the attention of backers in the larger metropolis who would help him to secure a match against the current American heavyweight champ, John L. Sullivan, the “Boston Strong Boy.”

Round 2:  
Jackson’s Challenge to Sullivan, 1889–1891

It was around this time that Jackson hired the Chicago-based Charles E. Davies as his personal manager. Davies was a shrewd businessman and entrepreneur. His chosen dress, a black topcoat with a high white collar around his neck, gained him the nickname “Parson,” implying the owner’s trustworthiness in a sport not known for high levels of integrity. No stranger to the growing business of sports promotion, “Parson” was alert to Jackson’s moneymaking potential and aware of the difficulties Jackson would face in his quest to become the World Heavyweight Champion.

As an experienced manager of pugilists, Davies knew that white boxers, motivated by their fear of Jackson’s size and by their racism, would erect a color bar against Jackson. He was also aware that sustained pressure from the sporting community was the only way to persuade a champion to defend his title. Left to their own devices, most champion title holders preferred to rest on the laurels of their previous victories rather than risk being defeated or injured. For the next six years, Davies devoted himself to promoting Jackson as an undeniably worthy opponent, one of the “most feared” boxers of his time (Burrill 1974:95). At the same time, he attempted to encourage white acceptance of Jackson by presenting him as “the whitest man who ever entered the ring” (Langley 1974:78). In this, Davies was greatly assisted by the positive public image Jackson had cultivated as a soft-spoken, mild-mannered gentleman.

Wiggins points out the irony in the public persona that Jackson presented:

3. Jackson’s manager, Charles E. Davies was nicknamed “Parson,” implying his trustworthiness. (Cincinnati Enquirer 4 September 1893:2)
dignity [...] and protest American discrimination on his own behalf. Ac-
customed from infancy to standing up for his rights, Jackson did not hesi-
tate to be forceful and more enterprising than many contemporary native
black American athletes. (1985:152–53)

Even before his association with Davies, Jackson’s adept reading of the ra-
cial climate in the United States had led him to modify his behavior. Endur-
ing racial taunts and blatant discrimination from whites while receiving the
adulation of the black community, Jackson stood tenuously balanced between
two opposing groups. The black community’s need for a racial hero was as
strong as the white standard that accepted only those blacks who could be ac-
commodating and ingratiating. Jackson’s difficulty in maintaining this position
can be seen in the differing newspaper accounts of the boxer’s fights.

The black press hailed Jackson as a race hero, focusing on his agility, light-
ning quick hands, and powerful build. These newspapers, such as the
Indianapolis Freeman, the New York Age, and the Cleveland Gazette, compared his
exploits in the ring to those of other black boxing greats such as Tom
Molineaux and Bill Richmond. The New York Age referred first to young
black scholars and then to prominent athletes when it affirmed:

These young men [black students] show what the size of the race’s brain
is; while Peter Jackson, the heavy weight hard hitter, George Godfrey
[...] and George Dixon [...] show what the size of our muscles is [sic]. We
shall yet convince the Anglo-Saxons that they are not the monopolized
salt of the earth and sea. (20 December 1890:4)

For the black community, Jackson’s appeal was akin to that of the mythic
John Henry. Lawerence Levine, in his seminal book Black Culture and Con-
sciousness, described the moral code of the “John Henry” types of cultural he-
roes as men who “defeated white society [...] by its own rules” and triumphed
“not by breaking laws” but by “smashing [...] expectations and stereotypes”
(1977:420). Jackson embodied the hopes of the black community by tran-
scending the role that had been established for him by white society. As the
Indianapolis Freeman declared:

Peter Jackson, as far as we have been able to know him, is our kind of
man. Gifted with unusual strength, he is not a bully. Flattered and
fawned upon him, he never loses his head. Did he [sic] and wined by the
best people of his race, he bears his honors in a modest and dignified
manner. His parting message at his recent reception at Philadelphia was,
“I shall never disgrace you.” We don’t believe he will. With the Negro
developing brawn as well as brain, we are feeling quite well over the
outlook. (17 May 1890:4)

The white press, though also impressed by Jackson’s pugilistic skills and
manners, focused the public’s attention on the boxer’s “rare” and “unusual”
qualities for “one of his race.” Throughout his 12 years in the United States,
Jackson’s behavior was contrasted to the antics of other prominent blacks of
the period who were characterized as wearing “freak clothes” or favoring “the
big cigar and scintillating diamond” (in Wiggins 1985:153). Days before the
“sable gladiator’s” death in 1901, the National Police Gazette recalled:

In addition to superb science and generalship, he possessed that quality of
gameness which is too often lacking in boxers of his race [...]. Throughout
his whole career Peter held the respect of foeman and friends alike.
He never flinched under punishment or threw a fight, and when defeat found him at last he did not inflict upon a long-suffering public weak-kneed excuses [...]. (1 June 1901:10)

While acknowledging Jackson’s prowess, the press unfairly diminished him by presenting him as a recipient, rather than a provider, of punishment.

Despite his popularity, the white press rarely granted Jackson the use of his Australian nom de ring, “The Black Prince.” Less aristocratic characterizations, such as “the dusky champion” or “the colored gladiator,” were substituted, along with racially identified descriptions of the boxer as “a member of the wooly headed tribe,” or one of the “short-haired fraternity.” Even though Jackson was a gentleman and a superb fighter, he was first and primarily identified by the color of his skin.

By the time Parson Davies became Jackson’s spokesperson, the boxer had already exemplified those qualities that were, according to Wiggins, “deemed suitable for members of his race. While never explicitly stating it, the white community believed that other blacks would do well to emulate him” (1985:152). As Jackson’s reputation as a boxer of merit grew, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the precarious balance between his conflicting roles as a formidable opponent and an amenable chap. Single-handedly, Jackson was attempting to fulfill the contrasting psychic needs of both black and white America. Throughout his tenure as Jackson’s manager, it would be Davies’s voice that issued the challenges, angry retorts, expressions of disdain, and affirmations of superiority that were so much a part of the puffing expected, and indulged in, by boxers. As a respected white man, Davies could say things that would be disastrous coming from Jackson’s lips. As the Cincinnati Commercial Gazette noted:

The colored fighter is always polite, but never talkative, and it is not an easy matter to gather an opinion from him of his own merit. [...] There is nothing boastful in his nature, and in that respect he is notably different from the rank and file of the short-haired fraternity. The Parson always fills the office of spokesman for his party, and as there are few smarter or better posted men in the business, his opinions are of value. (4 September 1893:3)

Davies was always careful to present Jackson in the most favorable light. Even when desperate for the match that would make or break Jackson’s career, Davies’s response in the National Police Gazette made it clear that Jackson was not threatening the white social structure:

Jackson never challenges anybody. [...] While he will ask for a match with the present champion, I do not think that he will try [...] force [...] through the newspapers. Peter is one of the fairest men I ever knew in my life. He believes in giving everybody a chance [...]. (29 October 1892:10)

Despite his undefeated record, Jackson was unable to attract the attention of John L. Sullivan. Hoping to position his boxer as the undeniable contender for the American championship, Parson Davies arranged for a highly publicized match at the Pelican Club between Peter Jackson and Jem Smith, the English champion. In the summer of 1889, Davies and Jackson traveled to London, where the Black Prince defeated the British champion in two rounds, earning for himself the right to be called the “Champion of the British Empire.” Almost immediately, Jackson and Davies were flooded with of-
4. Peter Jackson in 1891, from the sporting paper, the Referee. (7 July 1901:1)
fers from the States to back the pugilist in a contest against John L. Sullivan. Cutting short his European tour, Jackson returned to the United States, eager to prove his worth against the man who claimed to be Heavyweight Champion of the World.

Referred to by many sports historians as the “Father of American Prizefighting,” John L. Sullivan had done more to raise the public interest in the sport than any athlete before him. His brash challenge, “I can lick any sonofabitch in the house,” brought him immense popularity as he toured the vaudeville circuit, offering $50 to anyone who could stay four rounds in the ring with him. His 1889 defeat of World Heavyweight Champion Jake Kilrain was said to have aroused more enthusiasm than any presidential election to date (Sammons 1988:10).

John L. Sullivan was a national hero to rich and poor alike. He was living proof that, in the best of all possible democratic worlds, a man could transcend class and profession. More specifically, he was metaphorical proof that the white American male, and America, were the rightful dominators of the world. In Randy Roberts’s words, the syllogism went like this: “Sullivan is the greatest fighter in the world; Sullivan is an American; ergo America is the world’s greatest country” (1983:9).

In addition to being the world’s greatest fighter, Sullivan may also have been one of its greatest racists. The clearest statement of the “Boston Strong Boy’s” attitude is the challenge he issued following his ascension to the championship title: “In this challenge I include all fighters—first come, first served—who are white. I will not fight a Negro. I never have and I never shall” (in Roberts 1983:18). Some, including Sullivan’s trainer, William Muldoon, quietly speculated that it was personal fear, rather than racism, that caused Sullivan to refuse black challengers, particularly boxers of Peter Jackson’s capabilities (Wiggins 1985:155). The sportswriter for The Freeman, however, viewed the issue of Sullivan’s reluctance in a broader social context:

In these two qualities, courage and pluck, the most civilized nations have flattered themselves that they have no equals. Especially the negro has been regarded as deficient in the traits named, and he was thought inferior because he was lacking in them. But now what shall we say? [...] It is believed that that [...] great Bostonian, Sullivan, may meet more than his match in the Australian heavyweight negro, Jackson. How is this? Is the colored race to step in and steal the laurels from [...] white folk in this way? If so, perhaps those to whom only brute force can appeal as an argument may begin to respect the negro as a man and brother. (19 July 1890:8)

Whether motivated by personal fear or racism, Sullivan’s adamant refusal to meet any but white challengers encouraged other boxers to adopt similar positions. Despite offers of considerable prize money to meet with Jackson, Sullivan failed even to respond to any of the black boxer’s challenges. (Referee 27 March 1895:6)
While he valiantly tried to maintain an air of confidence [...], Jackson was obviously dejected about the way he was treated by Sullivan” (1985:156). Despite his disappointment, Jackson continued to give exhibitions against boxers of lesser reputations while hoping for Sullivan’s consideration. Many of these were marred by racial incidents, including the six-round bout that took place with Joe Choyinski. According to biographer Tom Langley: “The cheap seat roustabouts were violently partisan and anti-black. The loudest shouts came from them. ‘Go it Joe! Murder the black son of a black bastard’” (1974:26).

In 1891, still lacking a response from the American champion, the undefeated Jackson agreed to meet James J. Corbett, a relative newcomer to the sport, in a fight that was one of the most highly publicized matches of the 19th century. It was assumed that the winner would be entitled to a championship showdown with Sullivan.

With the prospect of furthering his fledgling career, James Corbett could not resist the bait, even though it meant abandoning his previous reluctance to fighting a black man. A win against Jackson would significantly increase Corbett’s credibility as a heavyweight contender. For Jackson, a win would make it virtually impossible for John L. Sullivan to ignore his challenges. Though neither man could anticipate the outcome, for both men the fight was a defining moment.

At the end of four hours and 61 rounds, the referee declared the tactical battle a draw. For Corbett, “that ‘no contest’ proved almost as profitable [...] as if he had downed the Australian in good shape [...]” (Referee 31 May 1893:6). Though Sullivan had pointedly ignored Jackson for almost three years, he readily agreed to accept Corbett’s challenge for an 1892 championship contest.

For Jackson, though he did not know it, the draw decision was the beginning of his slow spiral downwards. For the next three years, Jackson would battle Corbett everywhere but in the ring: in the press, on the stage, and in the court of public opinion Jackson and Davies tirelessly sought the rematch that “Gentleman Jim” Corbett had promised immediately after the draw decision. Little did they anticipate that, in the process, Jackson would trade his boxing gloves for the worn old red shirt of Uncle Tom.

Round 3: Jackson “Sits on His Oars,” 1892–1893

Aware that he would not have an opportunity for a rematch until after Corbett had fought Sullivan, Jackson was content to return to Great Britain, where he was scheduled to meet his old nemesis, Frank Slavin, in the ring. Slavin had publicly declared that “To be beaten by a black fellow [...] is a pill I shall never swallow” (in Langley 1974:47). His reasons for agreeing to meet Jackson may have been more personal than professional: both boxers had trained under the same mentor, Jack Foley, in Australia, and both men had fallen in love with the same woman. In what one historian has described as “one of the most viciously contested fights ever held in England,” Jackson won in a spectacular 10-round knock-out on 30 May 1892 (Wiggins 1985:160). By doing so, his popularity in England was assured. Feted by the press, the ranking nobility, and the finest social circles, Jackson enjoyed a sample of the kind of treatment that was appropriate for an athlete and a gentleman of the first order. British society valued his merits as a man and a consummate professional, unconcerned by his racial heritage. For the rest of his life, Jackson would hold a position of esteem in Great Britain. Yet despite the hospitable treatment he received in England, Jackson remained fixated on his primary goal. Over the next three years, Jackson would repeatedly comment:
“There is one contest I want and that is with Corbett. This is the wish of my heart” (National Police Gazette 26 November 1892:11).

Just a few months after Jackson’s victory over Slavin, Corbett defeated Sullivan to become the reigning American heavyweight champion. Soon after the fight, Sullivan’s trainer, William Muldoon, had the following advice for the new champion: “If I was Corbett I would at once draw the color line and fight no one but white men. [...] There should be colored champions and white champions, and I would like to see the line drawn once and for all” (National Police Gazette 24 September 1892:10).

Within a month after the Corbett/Sullivan fight, Davies issued a challenge on Jackson’s behalf to the new titleholder. He was too late. The proud champion was already engaged in a touring production of Gentleman Jack, a play that had been commissioned especially for its star, James J. Corbett. Corbett defended his decision in an interview he gave to the Referee:

[If John L. Sullivan was permitted to go his way in peace for four years between each of his great battles, and reap a rich harvest during that time, I think I should have at least one year accorded me before being compelled to leave the harvest field and defend the championship. I am clearing now on an average 2000 dol a week on my theatrical venture, and if luck continues should have 100,000 dol to the good at the end of the year. (25 January 1893:10)]

Committed to a minimum of one season’s tour with the piece, Corbett made it clear that he would not fight until it was over. His decision to become an actor was not an unusual one for well-known boxers of the time. In fact, the connection between the stage and the boxing ring had a long history. As Edwin Booth, the famous American actor, was said to remark after hearing of Corbett’s victory over Sullivan, “I am glad that the championship remains in the profession” (National Police Gazette 22 October 1892:2).

From the beginning of colonial America, boxing and acting were viewed, both legally and popularly, as interconnected. Early Puritan prohibitions linked the two together as immorral occupations that distracted the populace from the virtues of frugality, economy, and industry. Though theatre gradually gained acceptance, at the time of Jackson’s arrival in San Francisco boxing was still outlawed in most states. Boxing was viewed by many as an amusement inappropriate for a civilized society, a brutal throwback to primitive days when disagreements could be settled only by violent action. To circumvent the laws prohibiting prizefights, boxers often toured the country giving “exhibitions” of “scientific” skill, and the “manly art of self-defense.”

As early as 1824, William Fuller, an English farmer turned pugilist, conducted individualized classes for gentlemen in “useful, manly, and athletic exercise” (Wignall 1924:54), and booked available theatres to give masterful exhibitions promoting the respectability of his sport. Occasionally, Fuller arranged to have a boxing exhibition incorporated into the body of an established play. Some 60 years later, famous boxers such as John L. Sullivan and James F. Corbett were routinely adding to their reputations and their pocketbooks by touring the country in dramatic vehicles that had been especially commissioned by them from hack dramatists. The stage provided substantial financial rewards. For an exhibition, a boxer might receive as much as $500. A successful run of a play, however, might bring in four or five times as much weekly. Capitalizing on their reputations as pugilists, Corbett and Sullivan appeared in fully produced plays that were created to enhance their public images as defending heroes and unimpeachable patriots. According to Alan Woods, James Corbett’s promotions of himself as boxer, actor, and matinee-
idol, “were conscious attempts—which succeeded enormously—to create a positive (and profitable) public image” (1976:163).

A positive public image was essential to a boxer’s career. Often, the amount of money that would be established as a “purse” for a match depended on the boxer’s reputation and the amount of box-office income the event could be expected to produce. The box-office rewards of a positive public image, combined with the relatively untaxing (and infinitely safer) life of the theatre, held an almost irresistible attraction for boxers of Corbett’s status.

Acting had another significant advantage. While engaged with a theatrical production, a pugilist had a ready-made excuse for refusing all challengers. As the National Police Gazette wrote:

Jackson is eager to fight any man in the world [...]. Jim Corbett is an actor, and will not fight for one year. That Jackson recognizes the fact that he cannot get on a match goes without the saying. He made the crack about turning actor, but remarked that people might not care to see him as Othello, about the only character he could portray with any degree of success. He would not consider an offer to join a chorus [...] and he sees before him only one path, that leading to the prize ring. But unfortunately that path is clear at present. There is no one to dispute his progress, and as there cannot be a fight unless there are two men in the ring, Peter is forced to rest on his oars and await the turn of the tide of public sentiment, which will wash clear the stage of actors who can’t act and won’t fight. (3 December 1892:11)

Round 4:
Peter the Actor, 1893

Faced with awaiting “the turn of the tide of public sentiment” and no prominent prize fights on the horizon, Peter Jackson had few options available to him. He could become a boxing teacher; he could take to the road and give exhibition matches; or, he could follow the example of his peers and become an actor. Jackson’s resistance to the profession of acting is well recorded. In January of 1893, Jackson told the Referee:

I might take to the stage if nothing else was left for me to do, but I doubt if there would be any money in playing “Othello.” Colored actors are not popular in America, so I will stick to my old profession. [...] I am waiting patiently to see how long the public will stand acting champions. [...] I cannot compete with Corbett, the actor, because I am not a theatrical person, but just as soon as Corbett, the champion boxer, gets ready to box, I shall be glad to try him on. (18 January 1893:6)

Yet, within a month, the National Police Gazette quoted Jackson as saying, albeit with a slight curl of his lip, “several playwrights have spoken about writing a play for me. I can’t say [...] that I am in love with the idea of acting. There are too many of my kind acting now” (22 February 1893:6).

Davies’s influence on Jackson can be most powerfully seen in the report from San Francisco, published in the 1 March 1893 Referee, which reads: “Jackson has been LITERALLY SKULL-DAGGED INTO THE PENDING THEATRICAL VENTURE.” The article continues:

For a long time [...] Parson Davies has been unfolding to Peter the beauties and profits with which the life of an actor abounds. Peter has always pooh-poohed the idea himself, but the Parson, who is
A LITTLE STAGE STRUCK HIMSELF,

[...] has persisted and he has been helped along in his task of gentle coercion. [...] L.R. Stockwell, who is the proprietor of a theatre here, recently made an offer to put an “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” Company on the road if PETER WOULD PLAY THE TITLE ROLE.

Though the Gazette continues that when the scheme was first presented to Jackson, “he backed away like a terrified horse,” after a time the pugilist was convinced to look upon the idea “with more favor.” By the end of February 1893, Jackson was playing at Stockwell’s San Francisco theatre, after a two week out-of-town tryout, as the featured performer in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

The choice of Uncle Tom’s Cabin as a vehicle for Jackson was predictable, if unfortunate. The most popular play in the history of American theatre, by the 1890’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin was established as a “classic” bit of Americana. Inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, thousands of performances of various versions of the play by over 500 different touring companies had made the characters of Tom, Eva, Topsy, and Simon Legree cultural icons. Virtually every man, woman, and child in the country was familiar with the story. To a canny theatrical manager, it was a show that could be relied upon to produce a packed house regardless of the quality of the acting.

The choice was blighted, however, by the cultural meaning that the persona of Uncle Tom had acquired. By the 1890s, the play had long lost its antislavery message and had been reduced to a melodramatic tale of good versus evil with heavily racist overtones. Uncle Tom, that patient, long-suffering slave, was already an object of derision, and well on his way to realizing his ultimate linguistic destiny as a pejorative epithet. Uncle Tom’s death by flogging at the hands of a sadistic Simon Legree was a well-known and relished part of the performance.

Had Peter Jackson been an American, and familiar with Uncle Tom’s reputation as a man who could be treated with impunity by the white world, he might have insisted on a different dramatic vehicle. More likely, he would have followed the example of his fellow boxers and commissioned a more suitable play to be written for him. However, to Jackson’s unacclimated reading of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the play was a moving and powerful piece. The interviewer who asked Jackson about his role reported that:

The character he [Jackson] appears in during his theatrical career he likes well. Although he has never seen Uncle Tom as typified in Southern life, he says the character is “a marvelous study” and he has nothing but praise for the author. (National Police Gazette 17 March 1893:10)

Relying on Davies and Stockwell to choose what dramatic work he would perform, Jackson’s primary concern was that he not embarrass himself in front of his public. As he admitted to the special correspondent from the San Francisco Examiner:

There’s a whole lot about this acting that I don’t know anything about, [...] but I must say I like it, and I think, maybe, some time people will be glad to come and see me on the stage without the fighting business counting at all. Anyhow, I’m going ahead with it. I don’t think I made altogether a failure of it. Do you [...]?” (in the Referee 29 March 1893:7)

Despite Jackson’s enthusiasm for the play and his newly acquired profession, the decision to cast the boxer as Uncle Tom was viewed by many as a pecu-
liar choice. Physically, Jackson was the exact opposite of the Uncle Tom American audiences had come to expect. Though pictured in advertisements for the production as a bowed, weak, elderly old man, Jackson himself was the antithesis of these qualities. A.G. Hales, a sportswriter who traveled widely with the boxer, described Jackson in his book, *Black Prince Peter*:

> He was as nearly perfect as a human being could be: over six feet in height, broad shouldered, with ribs that narrowed in towards hips like the waist of a society belle. [...] His chest was deep, with plenty of lung power; his hips strong and well balanced; his legs lean and muscular; whilst his arms hung loosely by his sides like two lengths of wire cable. The muscles were not bunched up in great rollers, but lay along the bone in long india rubber–like coils, a sure and certain sign of speedy action as well as strength. (1931:15)

If the lack of physical resemblance did not present enough of a challenge for a neophyte actor, Jackson’s established reputation as a boxer worked against every preconception audiences had about Uncle Tom. In the boxing world, men became heroes because of their courage, aggression, and powerful skill. In Uncle Tom’s world, heroism was accorded only after a lifetime of Christian suffering, never-ending kindness and death through nonresistance. As the nation’s most widely circulated sports paper observed:

> Peter Jackson will make his debut as a full-fledged actor at the Stockwell Theatre, Cal., on the 27th when he will appear as “Uncle Tom” in the famous dramatization of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel. If Jackson had a play written for him entitled “The Colored Gladiator,” it would have been nearer to the mark, and far more suitable than his playing the character of “Uncle Tom.” (*National Police Gazette* 4 March 1893:11)

The *San Francisco Examiner* was more mischievously tongue-in-cheek when it declared, “Mr. Peter Jackson as ‘Uncle Tom’ is doubtless an intellectual treat, but what the public would be really interested in is Mr. James Corbett as ‘Little Eva’” (26 February 1893:6). Unlike the plays chosen by Sullivan and Corbett, which reflected and enhanced the “matinee idol” personas that the two boxers had shaped, the role of “Uncle Tom” could do little to increase Jackson’s reputation as a fighter.

Nevertheless, there may have been some strategic reasons on the part of Parson Davies and L.R. Stockwell for their choice of Uncle Tom for Jackson. From Stockwell’s point of view, his version might have a financial edge over other touring *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* companies if the title role were played by a man rightfully billed as “the most famous colored man in America.” Davies, for his part, was aware that the distinction between actors and their roles, in the public’s eye, was a blurry one. Audiences, for example, came to identify Sullivan as the patriotic, hard-drinking character he often played; “Gentleman Jim” reinforced his chosen public image as an elegant man-about-town in the plays he had written for him. Already the champion of both Australia and Great Britain, Jackson’s reputation as a fighter was well established. If the public could be convinced that Jackson was not a threat to white society, the racial barriers in his path to the ring might be lifted. What better way to show the white establishment that Jackson was a man who would cause no trouble than to identify him with the very same qualities that distinguished Uncle Tom?

In order to accomplish this, Jackson had to be a convincing Uncle Tom. No expense was spared in outfitting the production “in an excellent manner” (*San Francisco Chronicle* 28 February 1893:3) and providing the neophyte actor with a
The sprinkling of colored folks who had seats in different parts of the house attested the fact that the actor was in the hands of friends, and the Lotus Club contingent, who occupied one of the proscenium boxes, more conspicuously emphasized the desire of the colored population to claim the actor for their own. (3)

The success of Jackson’s performance reflects the reviewer’s pleased surprise that this boxer, unlike some other actor-pugilists, was capable of doing something “beside bluster and swagger and pose as a bruiser and beater of men”: It was in the third act Uncle Tom first came upon the stage. Little Eva, mounted upon a Shetland pony, was escorted in by Uncle Tom and by him lifted to the ground. Jackson had not a word to say at this his first appearance, but the audience gave him a hearty welcome, and his acknowledgement of it was in perfect keeping with the character of an old Southern family servant. So, too, when he came on stage again leading the pony away. He had but a few lines to speak and but little of anything to do, but his every movement was in direct contradiction of the idea that he was a big, burly bruiser, or a man whose business was to knock out anybody with whom he came in contact. As a matter of fact, during the entire performance there was not an intimation in the part that Jackson played that he had ever seen the inside of a prize-ring or that he was anything but the feeble Uncle Tom of Mrs. Stowe’s invention. (3)

Certain changes had been made in the traditional script of the play to accommodate Jackson’s lack of acting experience. Whereas in most versions of the play, Uncle Tom appears in the very first act, Jackson’s entrance was delayed until the third. Uncle Tom’s speaking role, therefore, was reduced to “but a few lines,” perhaps to aid the novice actor who spoke in a “sing-song” tone (Referee 29 March 1893:7). Nevertheless, the audience’s recognition of Jackson as a boxer would not be denied. For example, when Tom was about to be sold at auction,
and Simon Legree demanded: “Let’s feel of your muscle,” Tom responded slowly, causing Legree to bark, “Come, now, put up your fists!” This was a clear cue for the audience, one of whom yelled back, “And let him have one in the neck, Peter!” (San Francisco Chronicle 28 February 1893:3).

In contrast to the egotistical performances of Corbett and Sullivan, who could not for a moment allow the audiences to forget their championship reputations, Jackson

worked no advantage of this opportunity to show himself a fighter [...]. In the last act he received Legree’s body blow with the butt of a whip without the stiffening of an arm, where it is doubtful if Actor Sullivan or Actor Corbett could have refrained from some sort of manifestation of muscle. (3)

Pronouncing Jackson “not totally out of his element” in his new line of work, the reviewer also reported the buzz in the audience between acts: it did not seem to be any trouble for Jackson “to resist the temptation to be tough” (3). Once again, Jackson was engaged in a precarious balancing act; the more successful he became at portraying “Uncle Tom,” the less he might be identified as the champion pugilist, “The Black Prince.”

Round 5:
“Uncle Pete” Tours with “Uncle Tom,” 1893–1894

Comments such as those made in the San Francisco Chronicle, indicating the ease with which Jackson resisted “the temptation to be tough,” as well as the experience of the pre-tryout period in northern California, gave Jackson’s managers cause to worry. Prior to opening in San Francisco, Jackson and company had previewed Uncle Tom’s Cabin for two weeks in smaller towns. Despite their best efforts, however, the first night in Oakland, California, “was not a success”:

[T]he management found that “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” even with Peter Jackson and a very good company backing him, was very much like the magnet and the silver charm. So Manager Mothersole and Manager Stockwell got their heads together, and the result was that the original plan of the company was abandoned almost at the very start and the firm resolve of Mr. Stockwell that there would be no sparring in the Peter Jackson combination. They found that Oakland wanted gore, and Peter Jackson without gore did not go here. (San Francisco Examiner 23 February 1893:4)

Like the audiences who came to see Sullivan and Corbett box their way to heroism in similarly melodramatic plays, the Oakland crowd had come to see Jackson fight. Faced with public demand, the box-office conscious managers quickly sent out word that Uncle Tom would, in the course of the play, “lay aside his meek and lowly spirit just long enough to show [...] something of the way in which he promises to meet Corbett” (4). Pressing pugilist Thomas Johnson into service as a sparring partner, the wily managers inserted an entr’acte to Uncle Tom’s Cabin that Harriet Beecher Stowe never envisioned:

It was between the first and second acts, and when the curtain went up there stood Uncle Tom, white wig, gray mustache and all, save that he had thrown off the old coat and donned a pair of six ounce gloves. Then the gallery got its money’s worth, and the management came to the conclusion that people didn’t go to see Jackson act, but that there were a whole lot that went to see him spar. (4)
Parson Davies was quick to appreciate the potentially disastrous public relations dilemma he had created. While hoping to diffuse white fears, Davies could not afford to have Jackson perceived as a fighter who was not “tough.” Especially for audiences who were not as familiar with Jackson as the San Francisco crowd, it was essential that Jackson’s status as a championship contender not be lost. To counteract this possibility, Davies heeded the information gained from the early performances and made the boxing exhibition a standard part of the production.

Topeka, Kansas; Crawford’s Opera House—Stockwell’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin Co., starring Peter Jackson, the pugilist. Between the acts he gave a fine sparring exhibition with Joe Choynski. Jackson is said to be constantly improving in his acting, and even as it is his performance is well worth seeing. (New York Dramatic Mirror 22 April 1893)

In terms of the plot of the play, the sparring exhibition was completely gratuitous, but it served several purposes. Most critically, it reminded audiences of Jackson’s true profession, that of a highly skilled pugilist. It also attracted additional business. Though many in the audience came to see the play, a significant contingent paid full price to witness two boxers of considerable ability spar each other. And, as an additional bonus, the three-round bout provided Jackson with regular practice time to maintain his conditioning. As the Cincinnati Enquirer reported:

Jackson is in splendid condition. He is very temperate in his drinking, his only stimulant being Bass ale with his meals, and his boxing bouts with Choynski are enough to get up a good sweat every day and keep him from taking on too much flesh. (4 September 1893:2)

Joe Choynski, now another protege of Parson Davies, was a hard-hitting Californian boxer with a reputation as an intelligent, personable challenger. Following his earlier match with Jackson, the two had become good friends. Never one to put all of his eggs in one basket, Davies also used the tour to promote Choynski, who played the role of George Shelby, as a future champion by exhibiting him against Jackson.

Not every drama critic was as enraptured with the sparring exhibition as the enthusiastic boxing fans in the audience. The Albany Evening Journal found little but desecration in the production:

There is perhaps no novel ever written that exerted one tithe the influence of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” It was the beginning of the end of slavery in America and had not a little to do with the great internecine war that deluged the nation in blood. [...] Witness now its degradation—a vehicle for the introduction of black and white pugilists behind the footlights. [...] Those who were present were not long in finding that Peter Jackson [...] degraded the character of Uncle Tom [...]. (30 September 1893:3)

Another theatrical purist, the reviewer for the Boston Evening Transcript, despaired:
What would Mrs. Stowe have thought if she had looked forward when writing “Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” to the time when a dramatization of her work would be made the medium for exhibiting a prize fighter? That was what was done at the Boston Theatre last evening before a large assemblage. The pugilistic part of the performance was introduced between the acts, but one who saw the whole performance could not help wondering why that was done. The story had been so changed that one step further would not have been surprising and an encounter could have been worked into the plot. For instance, Uncle Tom could have accompanied George Harris in his flight and boxed three rounds with the pursuers, knocking them out instead of having them shot. He could have amused Little Eva with a sparring match instead of singing gospel songs to her as he did in the novel. At the close he could have a “fight to the death” with Legree and bring the performance to a pleasant termination. (1 May 1894:3)

Though this reviewer perhaps did not intend his sarcastic suggestions to be taken literally, the fact that the boxing exhibition existed as a separate, distinct, and incongruous entity—a pugilistic play within a play—highlighted its purpose. Jackson’s breaking of the fourth wall convention, and stepping before the footlights in his own persona, sans costume, emphasized the distinction Davies wished to make between the actor and his role. It was a startling reminder, thrust in the midst of Stowe’s intensely emotional drama, that Peter Jackson was, first and foremost, a great boxer.

Buoyed by the success of the first tour, which closed triumphantly in Chicago in April of 1893, Davies quickly arranged for a fully produced touring version for the subsequent season. Beginning in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, in August, the troupe traveled in specially constructed railroad cars through Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Maine, and Massachusetts, ending in Boston in May 1894. Despite the failure of many road companies to sustain profitable one-night stands, Davies had little difficulty booking the entire 34-week season in advance. The Boston Sunday Globe advertisement for the second season’s tour of the production boasted:

BOSTON THEATRE

It is fortunate that the Boston is a big theatre, for we have an attraction this week that will draw big crowds. No other play that was ever written has drawn so many people and had so many presentations as

UNCLE TOM’S CABIN,

And it never before had so famous a man in the role of Uncle Tom.

PETER JACKSON

Is today the most famous colored man in America, and he will give a faithful, painstaking portrayal of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s hero. (29 April 1894:19)

The tour proved to be financially successful, though it continued to be plagued by the perceptions that had prompted the inclusion of the boxing exhibition. While capitalizing on Jackson’s fame as a fighter and “the most famous colored man in America,” promotions for the show also promised a “faithful, painstaking” portrayal of one of the most abused characters in American literary history. Using the stage as a pulpit, Parson Davies planned
his introduction to the boxing exhibition to emphasize the precarious position of his prized pugilist. As the *Cincinnati Enquirer* observed:

Perhaps one of the most touching episodes of the play is the little play or speech of “Parson” Davies when he introduces Jackson and makes a bid for sympathy. The “Parson” plays with no uncertain talent upon that sweetest of all instruments, the human voice, and when he tells of Jackson’s modest aspirations, the handicap of color and his struggles to attain the fame already his, one rather feels that Jackson deserves even something more than fate has accorded him. (3 September 1893:10)

In the same way that the play toyed with the heartstrings of the audience, Parson’s pre-bout speech drew an uncanny parallel between the discriminations viewed on the stage and those found outside of the theatre. Both on and off the stage, Jackson was portrayed as the uncomplaining victim of white enmity.

As the tour continued, parallels drawn between the characters of Jackson and “Uncle Tom” became more and more frequent. The *Lawrence Evening Tribune* proclaimed, “No trace of his pugilistic life appears in the play [...]” (23 October 1894:2). The *Daily Globe* (Fall River) declared “He [Jackson] is not thrust forward as the central figure in a specially and villainously concocted play, but is seen in a role for which nature fitted him” (8 November 1893:2). Occupied with the business of touring and the ongoing press battle with James Corbett and his manager, Jackson and Davies failed to see that Uncle Tom was threatening to destroy the boxer’s credibility in the ring.

Round 6: The Press Battle

In addition to appealing to the better natures of those who attended the performances, Davies mounted a promotional campaign in each city on the tour. Throughout the 13 months of the production, Davies continued to seek a rematch with Corbett in the court of public opinion. Scarcely a week went by when statements, interviews, or news about the “upcoming fight” were not prominently featured in newspapers.

Davies’s public relations strategy included the appearance of several stories from different angles hitting the newsstands simultaneously. Within days after the San Francisco opening, for example, on 1 March 1893, the *Referee* reported that Jackson, “in talking recently about his theatrical schemes, said he would drop the whole business at short notice to get ready for a fight with Corbett.” (Corbett had already gone on record saying that he would not fight until after his theatrical engagements were completed.) Only days after the *Referee* article, on 3 March, the *Freeman* announced that Jackson challenged Corbett to fight him within 10 months. (Corbett had recently announced Charlie Mitchell as his next opponent.) On 5 March, the *San Francisco Examiner* published a long interview with Jackson, pointedly entitled “Ethics of the Prize Ring,” where Jackson defined the profession of boxing as “a manly art” in which the best man, in terms of science and skill, wins. Distinguishing himself from John L. Sullivan, and others by omission, Jackson declared: “Why, a fighter [...] must be a man. A mean coward never learned to be a good boxer in his life” (1893).

Regardless of whatever subject an interviewer pursued with Jackson, the boxer invariably responded with his familiar mantra: “[M]y ambition is to meet Corbett for the championship. If I cannot get a match with him, I think I will quit” (National Police Gazette 18 March 1893:10).
Throughout all of 1893 and most of 1894, a vitriolic series of challenges and responses spewed from both boxers’ corners, while each maintained a hectic theatrical touring schedule. Corbett’s manager, William A. Brady, was equally matched with Parson Davies in the art of manipulating public opinion. While publicly presenting his boxer as eager and willing to meet Jackson as soon as circumstances allowed, Brady also insured that Corbett would never again face the black boxer in the ring. Numerous obstacles appeared from the Corbett camp each time an agreement to fight was imminent: the size of the ring, the amount of the purse, the inconvenience of the date, or the presence of more suitable opponents all prevented Corbett from signing an agreement for the match.

Corbett and Brady seized each opportunity to deflate Jackson in the eyes of the public. The contrasting styles of promotion can be seen in the headlines that appeared when it seemed as if a match might take place in the summer of 1894. The National Police Gazette announced on 17 March: “Peter Jackson Talks: The Colored Gladiator Discusses His Coming Battle. The Best Man Will Win” (1894). One week later the same paper printed Corbett’s response: “Corbett Sure of Winning: Ten to One, He Says, That He Defeats Jackson.” Corbett consistently posed himself as the confident, fearless fighter, while Jackson remained the less flamboyant, more humble gentleman.

By early spring, agents of Corbett had begun to spread the rumor that Jackson was in a “weakened” condition, and a mere “shadow of his former self.” Accordingly, backers for the propositioned fight became harder and harder to find. Some sportswriters, referring to Corbett, mused that they “didn’t think he’ll make a date with Peter until the latter is old enough to play Uncle Tom in real earnest” (Referee 16 June 1894:6). On 20 June 1894, the pro-Jackson Referee published the following letter from Choynski, dated 29 April 1894:

[O]ur season is rapidly drawing towards its end. [...] I may tell you that Peter Jackson is in prime condition and was never in better health in all his life. [...] The outside world knows little of Corbett’s trickery and shuffling in order to evade a meeting with Peter. [...] Although there is a large sum of money up as forfeit, held in safekeeping, still this starring Pompadour is throwing the most trivial obstacles in the way to avoid coming in contact with Jackson. [...] He knows that if ever Peter gets him within a 24 ft ring his prestige as a champion would be gone, and his fighting days over.

Nevertheless, despite Jackson’s denials of ill-health, the rumors persisted. Throughout his struggle to engage Corbett, the ubiquitous rumors gained credence even among Jackson’s most ardent supporters. When Jackson returned to Australia in 1900, it was noted:

Reports published from time to time in American papers prepared us for a shattered wreck, a bowed-down, completely broken man; in short, a realization of the character that Peter made such a great hit in throughout America—Uncle Tom. (Referee 1900:7)

By the time the articles binding Corbett and Jackson to meet for the championship were signed on 11 July 1894, public opinion favored Corbett in a victory. Enterprising businessmen, like the editor of the National Police Gazette, immediately began promoting the long awaited showdown with memorabilia for sale to the public.

Determined to remove all obstacles that might prevent their meeting, Jackson refused to plan another Uncle Tom’s Cabin tour for the following year. Unbeknownst to Jackson, Corbett was gleefully planning his upcoming theatrical season as the heroic leading characters in The Gladiator, Metamora,
and *Julius Caesar*. In addition to planning next season’s theatrical tour, which would have delayed any fight plans, Corbett found another way to avoid the rematch.

The signed articles agreeing to the fight had only one stipulation: that the fight be held somewhere north of the Mason-Dixon line. Throughout his career, Jackson had been prevented by Davies from visiting the deep south. According to Tom Langley:

> In the evening of his years when the “Parson” reminisced to the journalists he had said that he had effectively cured Peter of his dream for a triumphal tour through Tennessee and Louisiana by presenting him with a copy of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” This book was amongst Peter’s possessions when he died. (1974:27)

Despite the offer from London’s National Sporting Club to host the match, the only place that was acceptable to Corbett was the Jacksonville Athletic Club in Florida. Peter’s response was related by the San Francisco correspondent for the *Referee*:

> “I have nothing against the southern sportsmen,” said Jackson to me. “I have met a great number of them in New York and elsewhere, and they are as thorough-going as the northern set. It is not the sporting men proper that I am afraid of, but the rabble. No one in this country needs to be told of the intense hatred of my race that exists south and I firmly believe that if I whipped Corbett, or any other white man down there, I would be shot before I could leave the ring.” (19 September 1894)

Figuratively wrapping himself in the American flag, Corbett refused to fight outside of the U.S.A. His manager, William Brady, issued the following statement on Corbett’s behalf:

> It will not be Jim’s fault [...] if they do not meet as opponents in a ring to settle the disputed question of superiority. Jim will fight anywhere in America, and it is not his fault that Jackson is a black man, who objects to battling in certain parts of the United States. (*National Police Gazette* 11 August 1894:10)

Against this final color line, Peter Jackson’s objections were as ineffectual as Uncle Tom’s pleas in the closing act. By insisting that Jackson fight in the south, Corbett personified the racial prejudice that had dogged Jackson from his first days in America:

> [O]ther than the Jacksonville Athletic Club and the National Sporting Club, virtually no organization was willing to sponsor a title match between a black and white fighter. [...] Unfortunately for Jackson, the idea of an interracial bout, particularly one for the heavyweight title, was becoming increasingly repugnant to the majority of white Americans. [...] The bigger the fighters, the more important the contest, and the more crucial it was that a black and white boxer not be allowed in the ring on terms of equality. (Wiggins:164–65)

For all intents and purposes, Jackson’s long pursuit of Corbett, and his chance at the Heavyweight Championship of America, were over. Peter Jackson was left with little to show for his three-year effort to get Corbett in the ring. The humiliation which Jackson felt was expressed by the boxer some
months later: “I have not been treated like a man” (*Referee* 10 October 1894:6).

**The Final Round:**
**Home to Australia**

By 1895, “Parson” Davies and Peter Jackson had split up. Always “with an ace under his cuff,” Davies cut his losses from Jackson and soon was promoting Robert Armstrong, the “Black Hercules,” as the next “Peter Jackson.” Interestingly, after his experience with Jackson’s struggle against the color line, Davies took a stand on the race question, expressing the belief that “if there is to be a class distinction between pugilists there should be a championship to decide who is entitled to the distinction of being the colored champion” (*National Police Gazette* 16 January 1897:11).

Joe Choynski continued boxing for Davies and married one of the female stars of the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* company. In a cruel twist of fate, this dear friend of Peter Jackson’s became a whipping boy for the American press in 1900, when he allowed “dusky Joe Walcott” to defeat him in seven rounds. Four months later, the *Referee* reported that “Choynski has never been forgiven” (6 June 1900:7). In similar words that had been used to describe Peter Jackson, Choynski was said to be “but a wreck of his former self.”

Corbett, for his part, revealed his true self in the months following the broken negotiations with Jackson. As Jackson retired to the more hospitable climes of England, Corbett gloated that the black boxer had “sneaked out of the country like a cur,” a “rank coward” who was chased from America’s precious shores by the champion who now openly declared “I bar nobody” (*Referee* 14 November 1894:6). Once Jackson was safely deposited thousands of miles away, Corbett challenged Jackson to fight, in London, knowing full well that the National Sporting Club was no longer willing to host the match.

Perhaps sensing Jackson’s broken-hearted state, challenges to Jackson multiplied from fighters who never before would have dared to cross the black champion’s path. To all of these, Jackson remained “in a state of quiescence, neither throwing down nor taking up challenges, or giving any sign that he was in the business” (*Referee* 9 October 1895:6). Reports of Jackson’s poor physical condition increased, with not a few attributing Peter’s decline to the inevitable fate that strikes those who dare to fly too high:

> “Black Peter’s” fighting days are about over. He has been petted and spoiled by the aristocratic sports on the other side. He has had too much prosperity, and the result has been an almost complete collapse. [...] The people who once regarded him in the light of a rival for the championship [...] are not now as sanguine of his ability [...]. (*National Police Gazette* 25 May 1895:10)

Peter Jackson entered the prize ring only once more in his life, in an ill-advised match with Jim Jeffries in San Francisco in 1898. Having done little training except for a few sparring exhibitions, Jackson was unable to stand after the third round. The thorough routing confirmed the skeptics’ opinion that Jackson was “broke up” and beyond his prime.

In 1900, “Poor Old Peter Jackson” returned to Australia. He died a year later, at the age of 40. As Wiggins asserts:

> The cause of Jackson’s death was officially listed as tuberculosis. It was a broken heart, however, that was probably most responsible for bringing on his premature aging and early death. Jackson’s failure to reach the
pinnacle of his profession and fight for the heavyweight championship was a saddening experience. It was apparent that certain whites in the fight game had locked arms against him and that he lived not in a benign community but in a society that often viewed his success with hostility. (1985:167)

Every biographer of Peter Jackson has dismissed the pugilist’s appearance as Uncle Tom as an uneventful and unimportant interlude in Jackson’s career. By doing so, they deny the powerful ability of culturally accepted stereotypes to influence and dictate society’s response to individuals and social conditions. For nearly 150 years, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has been a culturally explosive symbol in America. Years after Jackson had ceased touring with the show, John L. Sullivan was featured in his own *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* company. Significantly, Sullivan cast himself in the role of Simon Legree, titillating audiences nightly with the severe lashings he would hand out to the unfortunate actor who was hired to play Uncle Tom. The show closed when the company was no longer
able to find an Uncle Tom who could endure Sullivan’s brutality for more than a few weeks (Birdoff 1949:331).

In 1910, nearly 20 years after Jackson’s Uncle Tom, another black boxer became associated with the character. Jack Johnson was the complete opposite of Peter Jackson. Openly aggressive and boastful, he was seen as a distinct menace to the superiority that white boxers had established in the battleground of the ring. As he threatened to defeat white boxer Jim Jeffries for the American heavyweight championship, *Puck* magazine’s cover featured a cartoon entitled: “Uncle Tom’s Cabin—As It Will Have to Be Played If Johnson Wins.” The gloating Johnson/Uncle Tom figure stands nightmarishly large over the whipped Jeffries/Legree, saying “Did ah heah yo’ say, white man, dat yo’ done own ME, body and soul?” Suddenly, the benign image of Uncle Tom that white Americans had fostered was no longer recognizable. Attired in topcoat and spats, the envisioned Johnson/Uncle Tom has changed places with the white man, now old and feeble, in an unmistakable image of black ascendency.

Jack Johnson had much to thank Peter Jackson for, though he never acknowledged his predecessor’s contributions. James Weldon Johnson, one of the first black intellectuals to attempt a history that included boxing, compared the two in his book, *Black Manhattan*:

12. Peter Jackson’s gravesite in Queensland, Australia. (Photo courtesy of Richard F. Fotheringham)

Peter Jackson was the first example in the United States of a man acting upon the assumption that he could be a prizefighter and at the same time a cultured gentleman. His chivalry in the ring was so great that sports-writers down to today apply to him the doubtful compliment “a white coloured man.” [...] If Jack Johnson had been in demeanor a Peter Jackson, the subsequent story of the Negro in the prize-ring would have been somewhat different. (1991:73)

Jack Johnson’s stunning defeat of Jeffries sent the boxing world off in search of “the Great White Hope.” Peter Jackson had shown him that acquiescence and affability were not the keys to success. Jackson’s challenge in America had been not only to prove himself the best heavyweight on its shores, but the best black man as well. In this sense, Jackson did everything “right” in his attempt to be accepted as an equal by the white world of professional sports. Yet when he appeared in the role of Uncle Tom, he complicatively joined forces with all those white Americans who would hope to keep blacks forever mindful and subservient. In becoming Uncle Tom, he ceased to be treated with the dignity he deserved. Jackson’s early death was not caused solely by the cruel bruising he had received in the ring, nor was it totally the result of a rigorous life on the road. Jackson, mighty athlete that he was, was crushed by the collective weight of racial stereotypes and prejudice. In Australia, where he was laid to rest, his tombstone carries the tribute that had been denied him during his 12-year sojourn in America:

**THIS WAS A MAN**
Notes

1. In addition to works cited throughout, see also the serial, “From Orange Groves to the World’s Pugilistic Championship: The Life and Reminiscences of Peter Jackson,” published in the Referee, beginning 27 March 1901.

2. On 15 December 1824, Mr. Fuller appeared in Charleston in the “Extravaganza Burletta of Fun, Frolic, Fashion and Flash” entitled Tom and Jerry, or, Life in London. For this appearance, an entirely new scene was added, called “Jackson’s Rooms,” in which Fuller (who had taken the name of “Jackson,” after the President of the United States) and a gentleman called “Corinthian Tom” exhibited the art of self-defense. For further information, see Trevor C. Wignall, The Story of Boxing (1924).

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