Dictionary of National Biography, 1901 supplement, Volume 1 — Belcher, James

Thomas Seccombe (1866-1923)

1901

BELCHER, JAMES (1781–1811), prize-fighter, was born at his father's house in St. James's churchyard, Bristol, on 15 April 1781. His mother was a daughter of Jack Slack (*d.* 1778), a noted pugilist, who defeated John Broughton [q. v.] in April 1750. 'Jim' Belcher followed the trade of a butcher, though he was never formally apprenticed, and signalised himself when a lad by pugilistic and other feats at Lansdown fair. He was a natural fighter, owing little to instruction in the art. His form is described as elegant; he was, at any rate, good-humoured, finely proportioned, and well-looking. He came to London in 1798 and sparred with Bill Warr, a veteran boxer, of Covent Garden. On 12 April 1799, after a fight of thirty-three minutes, he beat Tom Jones of Paddington at Wormwood Scrubbs. On 15 May 1800 Belcher, aged 19, met Jack Bartholomew, aged 37, on Finchley Common, and after seventeen rounds knocked him out with a 'terrific' body blow. On 22 Dec. 1800, near Abershaw's gibbet on Wimbledon Common, he defeated Andrew Gamble, the Irish champion, in five rounds, Gamble being utterly confounded by his opponent's quickness. On 25 Nov. 1801 he met Joe Berks of Wem, and defeated him after sixteen rounds of desperate fighting. He fought him again on 20 Aug. 1802, and Berks retired at the end of the fourteenth round, by which time he could scarcely stand and was shockingly cut about the face. In April 1803 he severely punished John Firby, 'the young ruffian,' in a hastily arranged encounter. Next month he had to appear before Lord Ellenborough in the court of king's

bench for rioting and fighting, upon which occasion he was defended by Erskine and Francis Const [q. v.], and was merely bound over to come up for judgment upon his own recognisance in 400*l*.

In July 1803 Belcher lost an eye owing to an accident when playing at rackets. His high spirit and constitution forthwith declined, but he was placed by his friends in the 'snug tavern' of the Jolly Brewers in Wardour Street. Unhappily he was stirred by jealousy of a former pupil, Hen Pearce, the ' Bristol game-chicken,' once more to try his fortune in the ring. He had a terrible battle with Pearce on Barnby Moor, near Doncaster, on 6 Dec. 1805. He displayed all his old courage but not his old skill or form, and was defeated in eighteen rounds. He fought yet again two heroic fights with Tom Cribb — the first on 8 April 1807 at Moulsey in forty-one rounds, when Belcher would have proved the winner but for his confused sight and sprained wrist — the second on 1 Feb. 1809, in answer to a challenge for the belt and two hundred guineas. Belcher was again defeated after a punishing fight in thirty-one rounds, though the best judges were of opinion that, had Belcher possessed his once excellent constitution and eyesight, Cribb must have been the loser. This was Belcher's last fight. He was one of the gamest fighters ever seen in the prize-ring, and probably the most rapid in his movements: 'you heard his blows, you did not see them.' A truly courageous man. Belcher was in private life good-humoured, modest, and unassuming; but after his last fight he became taciturn and depressed. He

was deserted by most of his old patrons : one of the best of these was Thomas Pitt, the second lord Camelford, who at his death on 10 March 1804 left him his famous bulldog Trusty. Belcher died on 30 July 1811 at the Coach and Horses, Frith Street, Soho, a property which he left to his widow; he was interred in the Marylebone burial ground. By the consequence of his various battles, stated the 'Gentleman's Magazine,' aided by great irregularity of living, he had reduced himself to a most pitiable situation for the last eighteen months, and at last fell a martyr to his indiscretions. Portraits are given in 'Pugilistica' and 'Boxiana,' in which Egan remarks upon his likeness to Napoleon. A link between the silver and golden ages of the prize-ring, Belcher was 'as well known to his own generation as Pitt or Wellington.' Like the latter he is commemorated by an article of attire, a 'belcher' or blue and white spotted neckerchief, though the term is applied loosely to any particoloured handkerchief tied round the neck. His character and appearance are highly eulogised in Dr. Conan Doyle's novel, 'Rodney Stone' (chaps. X. and XV.) In 1805 a very brief but blood-thirsty 'Treatice (sic) on Boxing by Mr. J. Belcher' was appended to Barrington's 'New London Spy' for that year.

A younger brother, TOM BELCHER (1783–1854), was scarcely inferior as a pugilist to Jim. He won battles in succession with Dogherty, Firby, and some fighters of less repute, but he was badly defeated by Dutch Sam (Samuel Elias, 1776–1816). He was an accomplished boxer and

sparrer, and at the Tennis Court, during Cribb's proprietorship, he defeated with the gloves such experts as Shaw the lifeguardsman, John Gully [q. v.], and the coloured bruiser, Molineux. Tom Belcher, who is described as 'gentlemanly and inoffensive,' died at Bristol on 9 Dec. 1854, aged 71, universally respected, having earned a competence as tavern-keeper at the Castle, Holborn, subsequently kept by Tom Spring [see WINTER, THOMAS],

[Miles's Pugilistica, vol. i. (portrait); Egan's Boxiana, i. 120, 334; Fistiana, p. 7; Gent. Mag, 1811, ii. 194; Sporting Review, 1884; Badminton Library, 'Boxing,' p. 1.35; Notes and Queries, 1st ser. ii. 45; Blackwood's Mag. xii. 462; European Mag. lx. 157.]

T. S.

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