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Preface

‘Boxers are not like ordinary people’

WHEN the punches stop, away from the spotlight and crowds, Britain’s best boxers face another fight. For over 100 years, the lives of world champions have waxed and waned. Of the 53 British boxers who won world title belts from 1945 and had retired by 2012, 25 are known to have experienced problems with money, drink, drugs, depression or crime after their boxing careers¹. Paradoxically, life after excelling in the hardest of sports has been more painful than spilling blood in the ring for some of Britain’s most decorated and popular ring heroes. This book will look at why so many former champions struggle in retirement by telling the post-boxing life stories in particular of Benny Lynch, Randolph Turpin, Freddie Mills, Ken Buchanan, John Conteh, Alan Minter, Charlie Magri, Frank Bruno, Nigel Benn, Chris Eubank, Naseem Hamed, Scott Harrison², Herbie Hide, Joe Calzaghe and Ricky Hatton.

- 1 WBC, WBA, IBF and WBO versions of the world title; for a full list of champions see chapter 12
- 2 Scott Harrison is included in the list because he had not boxed for seven years by 2012, when he briefly started boxing again

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Of the disproportionate amount of Britain's most famous ex-pugilists to experience problems after boxing, some have overcome or learned to live with their troubles, while others have not. But why are some former champions so vulnerable once they hang up the gloves? When it was all falling apart for Benny Lynch, when he had lost his title on the scales after failing to shed the pounds accumulated by his acute alcoholism, the little Scot asked for forgiveness and offered an explanation.

'Don't blame me too much,' he said.

'Plenty of hard things have been said about me. I know I have been the bad boy of boxing. I know I have come in overweight for my last three fights. But can't you understand that boxers are not like ordinary people?'³

Lynch felt boxing was to blame for his problems, but is a successful boxing career, as opposed to any other occupation, always responsible for problems such as alcoholism or depression?

When world champion boxers are under the lights, they seem far from ordinary but invincible to adoring fight fans as they mow down opponents, the figure of physical perfection. Their macho exterior, however, does not protect them from depression, which they can suffer just like any one else. Frank Bruno's mental illness led to him being sectioned three times by 2013 and the former world heavyweight champion's story highlights how prizefighters are not immune to mental illness. Was boxing responsible for tipping Bruno over the edge, or is his bipolar condition something that would have developed anyway? And does a famous boxer inevitably have to contend with factors, such as repetitive brain injury, that might result in depression, alcoholism or crime that are exclusive to the fight game?

To understand this and other reasons behind a champion's struggle after boxing and descent into depression or down a path of self-destruction, it is relevant to first look at their careers and early lives. Perhaps boxing is not the sole reason

3 *Daily Express*, 7.10.1938

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why these champions struggled later in life, with problems beginning before they retire.

Tumbles from wealth and glory to misery and ignominy are not exclusive to elite boxers and can happen in all walks of life, but such falls from grace occur more in sport than elsewhere, and particularly to champion boxers. The rate of suicides in other sports such as cricket may be higher than in boxing⁴, but there have been more publicised cases of former world champion boxers experiencing difficulties or indignity in retirement than top stars of other sports. Through interviews and research, this book will attempt to explain why so many top boxers encounter problems after they are finished, whether boxing is to blame and, finally, ask if anything can be done to avoid these breakdowns after boxing.

This is the story of Britain’s world champion boxers who discovered that the hardest fight of all awaited them after their prizefighting days were over.

4 *Silence Of The Heart: Cricket Suicides*, David Frith



The biggest thirst in boxing

London, 3 October 1938 – Benny Lynch sits alone in the dimly lit dressing room, waiting to fight one last time. The boxing gloves make it difficult to drink and the little man has to use both trembling hands to lift the bottle to his lips like a child, clumsily spilling brown liquid down his chin and staining his shorts. Just in case someone walks in and sees the recently deposed world champion numbing his senses without the help of being hit, Benny conceals the half-empty bottle's contents. He wraps the brandy bottle in a towel, and knocks it back as if it is water. But Benny's drinking is no secret; the whole world knows by now there is one opponent the Scot just can't lick. His corner knew the state he was in – they had to carry him on to the train at Glasgow Central Station two nights ago – but, as long as they get him in the ring, this is their pay-day. Not for wee Benny though, who once again failed to make the weight. Benny earlier tipped the scales nearly two stones heavier than the eight stones flyweight limit he had ruled the world at from 1935 to June 1938. He was fined for not making the limit and, after expenses and fees for his corner, once again faces the prospect of fighting for nothing. No titles are on the line, no money is to be earned.

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As he makes his way to the ring through a cloud of cigarette and cigar smoke, Benny can barely walk straight and stumbles as he ducks through the ropes. Benny is already on rubbery legs and the fight has not even started yet at the Empress Hall in Earls Court. He is introduced as the recent world flyweight champion, defending the title less than seven months ago, but Benny is now a bloated ghost of his former self.

WINNING the world flyweight title had the same debilitating effect on Benny Lynch as contracting a terminal illness. Alcoholism increased its grip as his fame grew and once he was no longer fit to fight, Lynch's life plunged into a downward spiral. The reasons for Lynch's alcoholism were not solely related to boxing, but also to his early life in pre-war Glasgow without the guidance of either parent, and later his failure to assimilate to the adulation he got as world champion.

Much of Lynch's life before being world champion was spent in poverty. The plague hit Florence Street just 13 years before Lynch was born there in one of its morose, monolithic tenement buildings on 2 April 1913. Lynch's parents, John and Elizabeth, had come to overcrowded, industrial Glasgow from the rolling green hills and fresh air of Donegal, Ireland, for better opportunities. But their new life was not as they had imagined. In a cramped two-room flat, Lynch slept in the same bed as his parents and elder brother, James, until the family break-up when Elizabeth walked out one day. Perhaps it was her husband's drinking that drove Elizabeth to the extra-marital affairs, but she must have known John would be unable and unfit to look after their two sons, who instead grew up with an uncle and aunt.

Florence Street was as tough a place as any in the working-class Gorbals district, an area on the south side of Glasgow where children were deprived and neglected to an extent unthinkable of in today's Britain. It was on these mean streets that Lynch got his excitement using his fists. James taught Benny how to box and the brothers were as close as brothers

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could be. In the absence of caring parents, James had been the only constant in Benny's life and his death, from meningitis, was unquestionably the saddest moment of Lynch's youth.

After a while grieving, Lynch returned to boxing and came into contact with the next influential person in his life: Sammy Wilson, a former boxer turned boxing manager and bookmaker who spotted Lynch early in his fight career. Lynch's boxing developed at local gyms and at the fairground boxing booths on Glasgow Green while he worked as a cabinet-maker's tea-boy and butcher's shop message boy. The young street urchin Lynch lived amid a Dickensian scene of soot-stained Victorian tenements and factory chimneys belching out dark smoke. Today, we view Lynch in black and white photographs or sepia video footage on YouTube, and his own view of the world would have been similarly monochromatic. But Lynch lit up his life – and others' – amid this drab environment during the Great Depression through boxing and had his first professional bout aged 18 in April 1931.

Lynch looked more like a garden gnome than a professional pugilist. He had an elfin face, a Puckish sense of humour and, at 5ft 3in⁵, was as small as a pubescent child is today. He had a 26-inch waist and took size five shoes but, crucially, his reach was 165cm – just five less than that of future world heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano. His face was often creased by an impish grin – even when he was boxing – and he never lost those cherubic features until he began prematurely ageing after boxing. But across his right cheek was a hideous scar, the result of a broken bottle thrust into his face during a sectarian street fight in his youth, and acted as a constant reminder to the sinister side of Lynch's life.

His early career was one of modest earnings, but Lynch was carefree and enjoying his trade. As part of his training regime, Lynch would go on six-mile runs up Cathkin Braes – the highest area in Glasgow – and every day soaked his little

5 According to a photograph and statistics of Benny Lynch when aged 23 published in *Boxing News*, 16.8.1950

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fists in brine – given to him by a local fishmonger – to toughen them up. Wilson transformed Lynch from a crude boxing booth slugger to a slick, punching machine with a busy schedule. To get a crack at Englishman Jackie Brown, the world flyweight champion, Lynch first had to tame Tommy Pardoe in front of his local fans in Birmingham in April 1935.

And for Annie Lynch, who married Benny in 1935, the Pardoe fight was as significant as winning the world title in being the catalyst for Lynch's downfall. For the first time in years, Lynch was acquainted with the canvas, when the Scotsman's head crashed down heavily on the boards in the closing seconds of the first round. Lynch recovered to floor Pardoe in the eighth and ninth rounds before the Englishman's corner threw in the towel in the 14th round, but Annie claimed it was the knockdown in the first round which caused Lynch to suffer from headaches that initially started his drinking habit. In the months between the Pardoe fight, which earned Lynch £300, and challenging Brown for the world title, Annie even walked out on her new husband. Just months after their three wedding ceremonies and moving in to a flat in a tenement building in Rutherglen Road, Annie became exasperated by Benny rolling home paralytic after nights out with new friends.

'Many a time he had gone out of the flat not knowing which way to turn for the pain – and refusing to show it to anyone but me, for fear that they wouldn't let him fight for the world title. I thought the poor boy just had to take drink because of the pain,' she said⁶.

Thomas McCue, Lynch's friend since childhood, also noticed a change in his behaviour after suffering the concussive knockdown against Pardoe and it led to 'recurring violent headaches and periodic dizzy spells', which left him 'a man of moods'⁷.

6 *People*, 1952

7 *Boxing News*, 22.11.1950

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Lynch was in such prime condition and was such a prodigious trainer – he was said to be sparring 20 rounds per day at the time⁸ – that he could initially get away with the drinking and took just four minutes and 42 seconds to see off Brown, who was floored ten times in front of 7,000 at Belle Vue, Manchester, on 9 September 1935. Brown was out on his feet when the referee stopped the fight to make Lynch world champion but, for Annie, it was the moment that also helped seal his fate.

'I know that when he signed that contract [to fight Brown for the world title] Benny also signed his own death warrant,' she said⁹.

Aged 21, Lynch was overwhelmed by the attention his new status gave him. He could not go anywhere without attracting sycophants and Lynch quickly drifted into a social whirlpool that would pull him deeper into trouble. For Lynch, 'life became a continuous round of social functions', according to Thomas McCue, who went to the same school as the boxer and even sparred with him¹⁰. The champion was a working class folk hero who provided exciting escapism for his fellow Scots struggling with life or unemployment, acting as a beacon of hope for those with frustrated ambitions.

A lucrative world tour would have taken Lynch away from the temptations of adulation in Glasgow and also secured his fortune, but it was not on the agenda.

'No offers will tempt me out of Scotland or England. Here I won my title and here I'll lose it,' Lynch said.

Instead, what did increasingly tempt Lynch was frequenting public houses. Lynch did not defend his titles for another year, an eighth round knockout of Londoner Pat Palmer at Shawfield Park in Glasgow, but in between he had seven fights of varying quality. While Lynch won six of them, he was not always impressive, especially when beaten on points by Belfast's Jimmy Warnock.

8 *Boxing News*, 29.11.1950

9 *People*, 1952

10 *Boxing News*, 29.11.1950

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After conquering Brown for a purse of £1,000, Lynch spent more time at the bar than at the gym and, while he was mixing with his new friends, he was advised he could be earning more without his mentor Sammy Wilson. Lynch consequently dumped Wilson, who he knew better than his parents. The split was a crucial development in Lynch's downfall; if Wilson, a teetotaler who warned Lynch about the dangers of poisoning his body with whisky, had been retained, would he have allowed the alcoholism to continue as it would?

Wilson was awarded £1,000 by the British Boxing Board of Control for breach of contract when Lynch severed ties before the Warnock fight. Annie believed the separation badly affected Lynch.

'For three weeks he was hardly ever sober,' Annie said about her husband before facing Warnock¹¹.

* * * * *

Benny Lynch was 18 when he met Annie McGuckian, a machinist and later a hairdresser. They wed in 1935 but their early marriage was far from blissful. Lynch's band of new admirers, who had latched onto him since his world title triumph, kept his social life busy with functions and public appearances. Influential people wanted to be seen with the new champion and kept Lynch away from home.

Just six months after their wedding, Annie – then pregnant – was back living with her parents. She hoped it would make her husband change his ways and with the purse from his world title win they moved into a new home at Burnside with baby John. It was not long, though, before Lynch got restless and hit the bottle again.

'When one night he decided to go out and enjoy his fame, he came back in a terrible state,' Annie said.

'He wasn't just drunk. He was soaked in drink. After all his promises, too. It seemed as if my world had collapsed. It happened again, and again, and again.

11 *People*, 1952

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'But I was more experienced now. I didn't run out on him. I stuck there by his side coaxing him – and sometimes bullying him, too. Always the next morning it was the last time ever. I know he meant it to be, but there were too many friends by now, too many demanding to buy him "one for the road".'¹²

Lynch's profligate lifestyle led to him piling on the pounds between fights. The fights with Brown and Palmer were like a game of skittles for him, but Small Montana would not be so accommodating on 19 January 1937. Yet Lynch's boozing in the lead-up to the big fight suggested he was either completely dismissive of the fearsome Filipino or had a worrying disregard for his health and safety in the ring at the Wembley Empire Pool and Sports Arena, north-west London.

When Lynch started training for his world title unification fight with Montana, who was recognised as the world flyweight champion in America, he was 13lb overweight. Lynch was still sweating off the pounds three days before the fight at his training base in Taplow, Buckinghamshire. Dressed in 'woollen stockings and a couple of grey sweaters', knitted for him by his Granny Donnelly, Lynch admitted, 'I don't diet particularly... but work twice as hard to get the weight down. I'm not allowed to touch my favourite Irish stew.'¹³ He even went on a bender in the week of the fight. But still Lynch out-pointed Montana in front of 13,000 to become undisputed world flyweight champion, a feat that was deemed important enough to be splashed over the front pages of newspapers like the *Daily Express* the following day. Beating Montana with only three weeks of sporadic training gave Lynch a false sense of security and he was tempted to push his drinking even more, believing he could get away with it. Before his next fight against Len 'Nipper' Hampston, Lynch went missing on a booze binge and his sparring partner Johnny Kelly found him drunk, just 24 hours before the fight in March 1937. Not surprisingly, the fight did not go well. Lynch was disqualified after taking a

12 *People*, 1952

13 *Daily Express*, 1937

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beating and was on the verge of being stopped when one of the Scot's cornermen entered the ring. Referee Gus Platts had no option but to disqualify Lynch, but it was a better conclusion than an embarrassing defeat for the world's undisputed number one flyweight. In denial, Lynch blamed defeat on his baby being ill, as was reported on the *Daily Mirror's* front page on 2 March.

Lynch oscillated between the sublime and dreadful after becoming world champion. Ten weeks after his stunning knockout revenge of Hampston – just three weeks after losing to him – Lynch was again out-pointed by Jimmy Warnock. The only consolation in what was a sickening night for the Scot was that his world title was not on the line. A crowd of 16,000 had turned up at Celtic Park Stadium to see Lynch go for revenge, but he was out of sorts and out-pointed. Annie blamed herself for telling Lynch three days before the fight in Glasgow about the birth of their second son, Bobby. Lynch broke his training camp 'for a wee dram'... and ended up in utter disarray with drink for three days, returning to his training camp on the morning of the fight. Lynch lasted the ten rounds, losing on points, which considering the state he had been in the previous few days was an achievement in itself.

'Fight as he did to stop his craze for drink – and many a time he cried to me like a child for the strength to resist it – he wasn't sober long enough to get fit,' said Annie¹⁴.

'But I couldn't always watch over him like a mother, so every now and then I had to face the sight of my husband coming back home a hopeless, befuddled wreck. The pains in his head had been too much for him.'

In the days as champion, Benny Lynch was encouraged to drink by the spongers who were drawn to him. Whether it was hovering around Lynch at the bar waiting for a free drink, or directly calling on him at his home with a sob story and an outstretched hand, Lynch – a hard man in the ring but a soft touch out of it – always obliged.

14 *People*, 1952

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Lynch would have been wiser to stick to the Irn-Bru he endorsed in 1935¹⁵ but he was enjoying the celebrity life of being Britain's only reigning world champion. Outside of the flyweight division, British boxers had enjoyed little success in world title fights since just after the First World War. Welshman Jimmy Wilde (1916–23) and then Jackie Brown (1935) held the world flyweight crown before Lynch, but outside of the lightest division only Jack 'Kid' Berg had been world light-welterweight champion (1930–1931) since his fellow London-Jewish boxer Ted 'Kid' Lewis lost the world welterweight title in 1919. Being world champion in the thirties brought with it more credibility and attention from the national press than it does in today's era of four governing bodies with their own world titles over 17 weight divisions. Lynch was one of only ten world champions, one at each weight, and a huge celebrity across the whole of Britain.

Not only that, by beating Montana he had convinced the boxing public across the Atlantic. In April 1937, Lynch was the cover story on US-based *The Ring* magazine, then boxing's leading global publication. *The Ring* editor Nat Fleischer, who had sailed across the Atlantic to be ringside, said in his editorial piece, under the headline 'WHO SAID DEPRESSION? NOT IN THE BOXING GAME', 'Considering that a flyweight or even a bantam championship in this country [USA] could scarcely hope to draw a gate of more than \$20,000, the \$75,000 house these boys drew is an eye-opener. There are so many good boys in the lighter divisions in Europe, especially Britain, that there is no need for such lads to make a trip to America.'¹⁶

There were four pages dedicated to Lynch, who *The Ring* rated as world number one, and never was he more popular in his home city than after his victory over Englishman Peter Kane, his third world title defence. With his home life unravelling, increasing alcoholism and his torturous struggle

15 *The Times*, 27.5.2009

16 *The Ring*, 1937

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to boil himself down to the weight by starving, thirsting and sweating, it was remarkable that Lynch still had enough in him to deliver a career-defining performance against Kane at Shawfield Park, Glasgow, on 13 October 1937. Lynch, this time, had not compromised his training but, despite this, many punters were concerned he would either fail to make the weight or he would do so at the expense of his strength. Such thinking led to the unbeaten Kane starting as the slight odds-on favourite in front of a 40,000 rain-soaked crowd – which generated gate money of £20,000, smashing all records for a Scottish fight – screaming for the Englishman's blood.

* * * * *

Glasgow, October 13, 1937 – In a start startling in its simplicity, Peter Kane is caught unaware in the first round when, without any feints or range-finding jabs, Benny Lynch clubs him with a left hook to the jaw. Kane unsteadily rises from the canvas but survives and recovers between rounds. The challenger claws his way back into contention but Kane, a 19-year-old blacksmith from the Lancashire town of Golborne, begins to take a hammering late on. With Kane fading, Benny seizes control in the 12th. First, Kane drops to a knee from a left hook to the jaw in the 12th and then, after quickly getting to his feet, is struck by a fusillade of punches. Benny continues the onslaught in the 13th and clubbing hooks to the head twice send Kane to the canvas. Kane's big, bulging eyes are left rolling around his skull as his body lies supine, draped over the bottom rope following the second knockdown. As the fight is waved off, Glasgow invades the ring. For the first time that night, Benny is frightened as police try and keep his frenzied fans at bay. Wee Benny is flung on to a mass of shoulders as easily as a rag doll. He is the people's champion and he belongs to them.

Benny Lynch's finest hour was front page in most of the following day's British national newspapers. The *Daily Express* headline was, 'LYNCH WINS BEST FIGHT SINCE WILDE'. *Boxing News* declared Lynch as unquestionably the world's number one flyweight. The UK trade newspaper's report

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at the time said, 'No 8st man could live against such a virile display. Craft, whirling damaging fists and supreme confidence radiated from this compact Scot.'

It was boom time in 1937 for Lynch – he made £12,000¹⁷ – and no one could have imagined that he would be finished just six fights and seven months later. Lynch's purse of £4,000 for beating Kane quickly went down the urinal and he could not repeat that night at Shawfield Park when he took on Kane again in a non-title bout in March 1938. 'KANE DESERVED TO WIN: BOOS FOR REFEREE'S DRAW VERDICT' was the headline in the *Daily Mirror* the morning after Lynch was spared his blushes by a generous draw on points in front of 40,000 fans at Anfield, Liverpool.

For Lynch's last four fights, beginning with the Kane rematch, he failed to make the weight, leaving him out of pocket in forfeit money. Making the weight, after his booze binges, became an impossible task for Lynch as Annie Lynch described in a serialisation of her story in the *People* – which at the time had a circulation of 4.5m – from 21 October in 1952.

'He had to train on orange juice – nothing else for days at a time,' Annie said.

'Before one of his fights they packed him into bed at his camp and surrounded him with hot-water bottles. For a few minutes he lay there steaming. Then he jumped out of bed and rushed home to me. He was in a terrible state. "It's no good Annie, I canna do it," he screamed. He was convinced that if he went on fasting and sweating he would contract tuberculosis [which killed over 23,000 in Britain in 1937¹⁸]. He knew several boxers who had ended that way and it was a dread he would never overcome. That fear set him drinking again.'

The Lynches tried to repair their rocky marriage away from Glasgow on a second honeymoon in London's West End. There were better places to visit for an alcoholic and, during a disastrous romantic break, Lynch disappeared from their hotel

17 *Daily Record*, 7.8.1946

18 www.hpa.org.uk

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one morning. He met up with friends, who had followed him down to London and turned up unannounced, and embarked on a pub crawl around the capital that would last for days.

‘We looked everywhere for him during the next few days,’ Annie said¹⁹.

‘It was a week before we found him – a hopeless wreck. He had hardly stopped drinking the whole time and he was in such a bad way we had to get the doctor. It was the first time we had got to that stage. The doctor had to give Benny an injection to quieten him while someone sat on him.

‘We got him back to Glasgow and soon things began to go from bad to worse, for Benny had to defend his world title against the American Jackie Jurich a few weeks later.’

Twenty-two days before he was due to defend his belt against Jurich on 29 June 1938, Lynch was arrested for drink driving and spent the night in custody. The public’s opinion of him was changing.

The outbreak of the Second World War was just a couple of years away and newspapers – national and regional – were the main form of mass communication in Britain in the 1930s: 69 per cent of all Britons read daily newspapers while 82 per cent read the Sundays. So when papers such as the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror*, which had circulations of 2.4m and 1.5m respectively, and others had Benny Lynch’s driving misdemeanour on its front pages, the Scot’s problems would have been familiar with nearly every household from Paisley to Penzance.

A court case during the training camp for Jurich revealed the losing battle Lynch was having with alcohol. He was fined £22 and banned from driving for a year after pleading guilty to drink driving and reckless driving at Kilmarnock Sheriff Court²⁰. Lynch smashed into a telephone pole as well as hitting a pram, causing a 12-week old baby to be hurled into the air on 7 June. Fortunately, the baby was relatively unhurt. Lynch claimed he was pressed into having a drink on a visit to Irvine

19 *People*, 1952

20 *Glasgow Herald*, 6.7.1938

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and was seen zigzagging down the road in his car. A doctor told the court Lynch refused to take tests at the police station and would not account for where or what he had been doing that day, and 'replied to all questions with profane remarks'. Lynch even tried to say he had not been in the car and had travelled by bus. Lynch was given sound advice by Sheriff Martin Laing, who told the boxer 'to keep clear of undesirable companions and to eschew drink altogether. Boxing and the bottle, spirits and sports do not go well together.'

Despite the court case, there was no mention of Lynch getting drunk in training for a world title fight in the *Glasgow Herald's* sports pages on the week of the Jurich fight. Perhaps it was out of loyalty for their boxing hero that the local press failed to mention his misdemeanours, or perhaps it was embarrassment. There were, however, concerns about Lynch's weight. When Lynch, who had foregone food and drink for four days in a desperate bid to lose weight, stepped onto the scales, there were gasps as it was announced he was 8st 6.5lb more than the bantamweight limit. Lynch was stripped of the world flyweight title and in what was an expensive fight for the troubled Scot, he forfeited £250 for weighing in over, £200 for breach of contract and a further £200 to the British Boxing Board of Control.

A crowd of 14,000 was down on what it should have been at Love Street, the home of St Mirren Football Club. The public had decided to stay away after Lynch lost the title on the scales, three weeks after he had been arrested for drink driving. Those that did turn up cheered the American to the ring while Lynch was booed by his fellow Glaswegians. Thoughts of losing the title and letting down Annie, his sons and the thousands who loved him swilled around Lynch's head before spewing out in a furious fistic assault on Jurich. Lynch may have been booed to the ring, but he turned the jeers to cheers by flooring Jurich five times before knocking him out in the 12th. Afterwards, Lynch vowed to resume his career as a bantamweight but the damage had been done. Annie Lynch believed losing the world

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title – albeit on the scales – left a dark depression hanging over her husband.

‘I’m certain now that this was the final blow that broke Benny’s heart,’ she said²¹.

‘He was dead set on winning that fight – not only to keep his titles but to win the Lonsdale Belt outright for his sons. He knew then he could never fight as a flyweight again and could never win the Lonsdale belt for his boys – and his heart was broken. From then on he lived only for drink.’

At the same time as Lynch was gaining pounds in weight, he was losing pounds from his bank account. Lynch was never able to manage his finances and towards the end, he was fighting for nothing. Others were getting richer while he got poorer. After the Jurich fight, bailiffs visited Lynch’s house and emptied it of furniture. The debts – hundreds of pounds in unpaid income tax – stunned Annie.

‘All our money had gone,’ she said²².

‘The thousands of pounds Benny was supposed to have earned with his fists didn’t exist. Years before Benny had bought two bonds for £375 each. They were to be a nest-egg for our boys. I sold them both and paid the money over to save our home. From then until his next fight [Kayo Morgan, closely followed by Aurel Toma] Benny was drinking hard from opening to closing time. Every night he came home stupefied and helpless – there we were, facing ruin.’

Though he had no idea of it yet, Lynch was just four months and two depressing defeats away from the end of his career. Lynch was not in a fit state to fight by this time. For American Kayo Morgan on 27 September 1938 at Shawfield Park, Lynch could not even make the featherweight limit, tipping the scales at 9st 1lb 14oz. Lynch’s timing was off and the 12-round points defeat denied him a lucrative shot at Puerto Rico’s world bantamweight champion Sixto Escobar, who fought Morgan instead the following year.

21 *People*, 1952

22 *People*, 1952

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Missing the weight again cost Lynch £500 for the Morgan fight, which he ended up with nothing from after the promoter ran out of money. Before fighting Morgan, Lynch had already signed to fight six days later in London against an unknown Romanian called Aurel Toma, whose greatest claim to fame until that point was once being the chauffeur to King Carol of Romania. The fight was made at 8st 10lb, but Lynch, with a cigarette hanging limply from his mouth, came in at a career heaviest of 9st 5lb. The purse was lost again, but Lynch was oblivious to that or anything else after spending each of the six days since the Morgan defeat intoxicated. Lynch passed the pre-fight medical courtesy of caffeine tablets and a selfish promoter leaning on lenient officials from the British Boxing Board of Control. Instead of a pre-fight medical, it was more like a sobriety test as the doctor asked Lynch to stagger down a chalk line. The promoter of the show threatened to sue the doctor if he prevented Lynch from boxing Toma, so he was shamelessly passed fit²³.

Sam Burns, a boxing manager, found Lynch drunk at a doss-house the night before the Aurel fight and when he visited him shortly before the first bell, it was the same story.

'One minute before Benny was due into the ring I went into the dressing room to see him jerk his hand,' Burns said²⁴.

'But I moved just a bit quicker. Benny had a full glass of neat brandy to his lips. As soon as he left the room I began to search for I had an idea that he might have had more than one glass. At last, cunningly tucked away in a rolled up towel, I discovered a bottle, only half full. Benny already had the rest...

'My instant thought was that I must get hold of somebody with the authority to stop the fight. But my search had taken too long. When I got outside, Benny was already coming from his corner for the second round. It was murder.'

* * * * *

23 *Peter Wilson, The Man They Couldn't Gag*

24 *People*, 1952

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London, 3 October 1938 – When the pasty-faced, ill-looking man takes off his robe in the middle of the ring at the Empress Hall, his soft belly rolls over the top of his shorts. Champions aren't supposed to look like this, and this is not how Benny Lynch appears in photographs and newsreels. The crowd in Earls Court becomes even more appalled when the fight starts and a disinterested Benny moves around at a funeral pace. Romanian Aurel Toma is pleasantly surprised to discover the man in front of him is an almost statuesque target, standing square on with flat feet with hands down. He can't miss and sends Benny corkscrewing to the canvas with a left to the jaw in the third round. Benny is left grovelling on the canvas, with shouts from the crowd of 'drunk' and 'bum' ringing in his ears. He will never box again, but faces a fight of a different kind.

It was the first time Benny Lynch had been knocked out in 119 professional bouts²⁵ and he would never be seen in the professional ring again. He wobbled into the ring – as 'fat as the side of a house', as Lynch described himself a few days later – and had to be carried out of it. Lynch took the count lying flat on his back, puffy faced, with his arms outstretched above his head and eyes shut²⁶. He could have been dead.

'Fit and well I could have licked Toma easily, but as I was I could hardly see him,' said Lynch.

Lynch's life was then played out as a soap opera in the national newspapers over the next few months as attempts were made to help the little boxer in his battle with alcohol. Two days after the fight, on 5 October, the National Sporting Club (NSC), promoters of the Toma bout, were reported as offering to pay the £400 cost of five-months rehabilitation, starting with ten days at a nursing home in Chislehurst, south-east London.

'It's the greatest fight of my life – the fight with myself,' said Lynch as he confessed about his battle with John Barleycorn, a personification of whisky and alcohol, to the *Daily Express*²⁷.

25 www.boxrec.com

26 photographs in *Boxing News*, 24.1.1951

27 *Daily Express*, 7.10.1938

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'Since I fought Montana and won the world flyweight title I have been a Benny Lynch that I would not have known two years ago. My first title [Scottish title win against Jim Campbell] changed it all. I made new friends but round about them grew a huge army of scroungers and tappers... [Beating Jackie Brown] made me still more so-called friends and until I forfeited my world title by being overweight when I was supposed to be training for Jackie Jurich, I was surrounded by them.

'Funny how these friends are prepared to drink all night – on your money. They got me into the habit with their flattery. It seemed a great thing to me who had lived the clean life of a boxer to be able to mix in good hotels with men of the world and drink alongside them. The habit caught up on me before I fought Peter Kane the second time... I was almost lucky to get a draw.

'I lost the Morgan fight on points but by this time I had stopped caring. I still had not seen through the ring of so-called friends who gathered around me and I was content to live on their silly flattery. I have had my lesson.'

Lynch identified the 'constant temptation of flatterers' as the reason why he needed to go to a nursing home, where he would be without his dearest friend, Crawford's Liquor Whisky.

'I shall be in a place where John Barleycorn can't get at me,' he added.

'This is the greatest fight of them all – the fight with myself – and I am more confident of it than I have ever been about any of the others.

'I am convinced that I shall still be able to fight for a world championship – maybe Peter Kane, or maybe Sixto Escobar.'

But Lynch's optimism and ebullience only lasted a week.

Boxing had been the only refuge in the turbulent life of Benny Lynch and after his last professional fight it became clear that the former champion was losing his battle with alcoholism. The Gorbals was no place for a reforming alcoholic. It had 118

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pubs – one for every 383 of the 45,146 population²⁸. The bars were inviting places not just for the booze but because they were far more salubrious than the slums the locals lived in. The misunderstanding of alcoholism and lack of effective support at the time undoubtedly did not help Lynch's hopes of beating the bottle.

Early in November 1938, Lynch walked out of the 'nursing home' in Chislehurst, without a hat or coat, and caught the train back to Glasgow. He even had to borrow money for the train ticket at the station from a train guard.

'I couldn't stand the strictness of the routine,' Lynch said.

'I miss my wife and my friends in Glasgow.'

In a tearful telephone call with the NSC two days later, Lynch pleaded to be given a second chance at drying out at the clinic. He returned for a short spell, but it was no panacea.

Annie was told at the clinic that her husband was drinking himself to death. She turned to see her husband battling with the shakes, the effect caused by withdrawal from alcohol known as delirium tremens, or DTs.

'I was able to see him through a panel; he was unconscious on a bed,' she said²⁹.

'It was the last stage of drink. The doctor shook his head. "Unless he alters his ways he'll be dead within the year," he said.'

The next idea to cure Lynch of his wayward ways was to send him to a monastery in the Knockmealdown Mountains, in County Waterford, where 70 Cistercian monks lived in isolation. But Lynch could not stick the monastic life in Ireland for long, and went straight to the nearest pub after getting out. On his return to Glasgow, there was little money for the booze, so Lynch began selling his boxing trophies and memorabilia.

'Soon everything began to go,' said Annie.

By early 1939, Lynch was back in training for a proposed comeback when there was the curious case of his disappearance one night from the training camp's base, a hut a mile on the

28 *Benny*, John Burrowes

29 *People*, 1952

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moors above Carbeth, Stirlingshire. It was close to freezing on 23 January 1939 and Lynch was wearing only pyjamas. Six police officers and other members of the search party spent three hours looking for Lynch, who was eventually found 'almost unconscious'³⁰ just after 3.30am, shivering and grovelling on his hands and knees in a hedge. He had been wandering around the moors, barefoot, in freezing conditions for six and a half hours after becoming disorientated in heavy mist after leaving the caravan to go to the toilet.

'He was discovered a short distance from his training hut, lying behind a hedge,' reported the *Glasgow Evening Times*. 'He was suffering from exposure and cuts on his legs and feet.'

Lynch had been in camp just a week and it is not outrageous to surmise he disappeared into the mist after his thought-process had become clouded by alcohol. The comeback was off.

Then came one of the most shocking stories ever to involve a high-profile British boxer at the time. In the late afternoon of 20 February 1939, readers of the *Evening Telegraph* – then the most widely circulated evening newspaper in Scotland – were greeted by this-front page headline across seven columns, 'BENNY LYNCH ACCUSED OF ASSAULT ON HIS CHILD'. On the night of 9 February 1939, Lynch had come home wild on whisky and attacked Annie, her 11-year-old sister Elizabeth McGuckian and tried to gas his 18-month-old son Bobby. Lynch spent the night in the cells after being arrested at his home in Cambuslang after he had 'seized hold of him [Bobby], turned on two sets of a gas cooker and held him in proximity to the escaping gas,' Hamilton Sheriff Court heard³¹.

Lynch also seized Annie 'by the ears, pulled her about and kicked her on the legs' as well as kicking Elizabeth, who ran out of the house to get the police. When two constables arrived, Lynch 'repeatedly kicked each of them on the legs' and 11 days later at the police station in Cambuslang, Lynch assaulted

30 *Glasgow Evening Times*, 23.1.1939

31 *Glasgow Herald*, 23.2.1939

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another policeman. Crowds gathered outside the court, eager to learn more about the ignominy of the man who not so long ago was Scotland's national hero. Lynch had been due to return to the ring on 27 February 1939, but was remanded in custody for the rest of that week.³²

At the trial in March, Annie painfully told the court how her own husband turned on two of the gas jets and held their son 'an inch or two from the escaping gas'. Annie broke down in tears as she relived the moments when Lynch tried to gas their youngest son. When asked in court if her husband loved his children, Annie replied, 'He has not, as he has a child in Hairmyres [Hospital] and he has not been to see the child in seven months.'³³

The press lapped up the story, with the *Evening Telegraph* once again giving it the front page headline 'WIFE GIVES EVIDENCE AGAINST BENNY LYNCH' on 6 March 1939. Annie claimed Lynch turned on the gas jets, but they were not lit. Sheriff Stanley Brown, who conducted the case at Hamilton Sheriff Court, found that Annie and her sister's account were contradictory, so could not charge Lynch of gas poisoning his infant son. Lynch escaped prison with a £20 fine after being found guilty of four other assault charges, but the incident had convinced Annie she needed to leave Benny.

'It was no longer a good place for the children – especially as Benny was getting beside himself when he got drunk,' she said.³⁴

'But only once did he lay a finger on me. That was in February 1939. One night he came home and he looked as if he had gone out of his head.

"Get out of the house!" he yelled and then kicked me on the legs. My sister was with me and she tried to stop him only to get a kick herself. He grabbed the baby and held him over the gas stove. "I'll gas him," he shouted.'

32 *Evening Telegraph*, 20.2.1939

33 *Evening Telegraph*, 6.3.1939

34 *People*, 1952

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Lynch's life was falling apart. After examination by two doctors, the British Boxing Board of Control revoked Lynch's boxing licence on 26 August 1939 because his alcoholism had given him a heart condition. Lynch's deteriorating health meant the recent professional athlete was rejected for the Services when called up early in the Second World War due to high blood pressure. Instead, Lynch was given war work until the end of hostilities in 1945.

In August 1939, Lynch was back in the boxing booths, fighting four or five times a day and challengers were paid £1 for every round they stood up to him at Lammas Fair, St Andrews³⁵. Pictures from the time show Lynch looking heavier but he was among old friends and being cheered again. In the ensuing years, Lynch toured with a boxing booth in the summer months, worked in a factory and as a labourer. But it was only the drinking that he stuck at.

'In all his life Benny had never held down a job for more than a few months and the idea that he might have to work for a living had never entered his head,' said Lynch's friend Thomas McCue.³⁶

Lynch rapidly aged and was unrecognisable from the wiry, bony man with sharp features and lightening reflexes. His infatuation with alcohol meant the little money he had went on booze rather than looking after himself.

In 1940, while the nation was doing its best to cope with all that the Second World War brought, Lynch was found 'in a hopeless state of intoxication'³⁷ one night in Paisley and fined 30 shillings. 'A good Samaritan' recognised the former boxer and drove him home, but Lynch could not get into the house and was handed over to the police.

There was a more disturbing episode in 1942 when Lynch was fined a guinea with the option of ten days in jail for assaulting two girls aged seven and ten years old in a cinema.

35 *Evening Telegraph*, 7.8.1946

36 *Boxing News*, 31.1.1951

37 *Nottingham Evening Post*, 27.4.1940

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The court heard how Lynch, who according to his solicitor 'had some drink', had sat beside four young girls. When one of the girls tried to change seats instead of sitting next to Lynch, he put his arm around her neck. The magistrate Bailie Scott said, 'I feel this is something more serious than a simple case of assault. No individual with common sense would enter into conversation with little girls in a dark place like a cinema. You [Lynch] are responsible for taking drink and for your actions.'³⁸

Lynch was back in court two years later but a charge of resetting a book containing two savings certificates was dropped³⁹. Lynch had asked a man in the street for a loan of £1 in order for 'a drink', handing over a savings book containing £15 of savings as security. The savings book turned out to be stolen, but Lynch denied any knowledge of it when questioned by police, and the charge was found 'not proven'.

Benny Lynch had been a celebrity, but became a forgotten man. Where he had once been the most popular person in Glasgow, and one of the most recognisable faces in Britain, he was a lonely figure after 1940, a down and out, and slipped off the radar. Perhaps people turned away from him out of disgust at what he had become; or perhaps it was disappointment.

'Those who had once vied for his company now crossed the street when Benny hove into sight,' said Lynch's friend Thomas McCue in 1951⁴⁰.

'It was a bitter and lonely existence for one who not so long ago had been the toast of the town. But Benny was past caring.'

Those who had fed off him like parasites were long gone.

And so was Annie, who had moved out to a smaller house in Paisley with their two sons. Lynch moved in with his mother, who had been absent in his childhood, and after she died he lived at a working men's lodging house.

38 *Evening Telegraph*, 21.10.1942

39 *Evening Telegraph*, 4.9.1944

40 *Boxing News*, 31.1.1951

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'For the sake of the children I did the only thing possible,' Annie said⁴¹.

'I took them home to my mother's and got a job. For weeks Benny used to wait for me in the streets and beg me to go back. I had to say no. He went to live with his mother and sometimes when I was at work he would call and take the children for a walk. I didn't mind. It wasn't Benny's fault that he wasn't a good father. He wanted so much to be one.

'Every now and again there would come a knock at our door. There would be nobody there, but on the doorstep would be a little model that Benny had made for the children out of an old piece of wood and a knife. He would not let us see him as he was – down and out and bedraggled – so he would leave the toys and hurry away.

'There were five long years like that then on August 6 1946, a policeman called to tell me that Benny had collapsed and been taken to hospital.'

* * * * *

Glasgow, 6 August 1946 – Benny Lynch staggers in to Southern General Hospital shortly after five o'clock, resigned to his fate.

'I'm dying,' he gasps.

He is laid alongside soldiers injured or shell-shocked from the Second World War and it will not be long before Wee Benny's own battle is over. The wife, two boys, world title, money, friends, fans, hangers-on and house are all long gone. He is alone now, hardly breathing and malnourished. Pickled by alcoholism, his body is breaking down and it will not be long before Wee Benny is gone.

A little over three hours after entering a Glasgow hospital with feverish symptoms and breathing difficulties on 6 August 1946, Benny Lynch was dead. He was 33. Lynch left behind a wife and two sons, aged ten and nine. Four months previously, Lynch had been treated for tuberculosis at the Middlesex Hospital, London⁴².

41 *People*, 1952

42 *Evening Telegraph*, 7.8.1946

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When Annie Lynch got to the police station, she was told over the telephone that her estranged husband was already dead. Lynch's only possessions were a few shillings and a creased photograph of Annie and him on honeymoon.

'Who knows what is going to happen in the glove game? Uncertainty is actually the spice of boxing,' said Lynch when he was world champion. But Peter Wilson, boxing correspondent of the *Daily Mirror*, claimed most of British boxing were unsurprised by his death. A month before his demise, Lynch was ringside for the Jackie Patterson-Joe Curran world title fight at Hampden Park. Wilson described Lynch's appearance as 'gross and unhealthy' and saw no one speak to the former world champion all night⁴³.

News of Lynch's death was 'the announcement everyone in boxing had expected'. Earlier in the summer of 1946, Lynch went looking for work at Jim Patterson's Boxing Booth. Patterson instead gave Lynch a small advance and told him to come back when he felt better. It was the last time he saw Lynch.

From the £25,000 (upwards of £1.4m in today's money and an income value of over £5m) he had earned, the trophies and belts he had garnered, Lynch left nothing and died alone. For one last pitiful time, Benny Lynch was front page news north and south of Hadrian's Wall.

Whether or not Lynch was found collapsed in a Glasgow gutter or wondering aimlessly around a Glasgow Dockyard, few deaths of former world champions can be as pathetic as his. It inspired a play in 1974 by Bill Bryden, *Benny Lynch Scenes from a Short Life*, which ends with the sad scene of Lynch dying of pneumonia without his family around him in hospital, calling for his parents. But Lynch's son Bobby, who the boxer threatened to gas in a drunken rage, is adamant the truth behind his death is at odds to the one widely believed through contemporary media reports. Lynch's death certificate gives his death as 'cardiac failure, chronic alcoholism', a disorder that had lasted 'eight

43 *Ringside Seat*, Peter Wilson

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years⁴⁴. Newspaper reports described Lynch being found in the gutter, dying of alcoholism, pneumonia and malnutrition. Bobby Lynch believes some of the stories were embellished so as to portray an even more pitiful and sensational end.

'There has been so many stories about how he died, none of them true,' said Bobby, who emigrated to Canada along with his mother, step-father and step-brother in 1966.

'It's why we left to Canada because they just wouldn't let it lie. I heard one that he broke into a bar and drunk it dry; that he was found wandering around a dockyard and was found in a lodging house.

'We would get it regularly in the newspapers in Scotland. People were obsessed with how he died and it was just rubbish.

'The truth is he walked into the hospital and he knew he was going to die. He told them that in the hospital. He was 33. It was the result of drink and not eating properly. He wasn't found at a lodging house, but walked into Southern General Hospital in Glasgow, which wasn't far from where he was living at the time. He was dressed nice, but the stories are that he was dressed like a tramp. People have exaggerated his story.'

Lynch may have been a lonely impoverished drunk at the end of his life, but more than 1,000 people turned up for his funeral at St Kentigern's Cemetery⁴⁵. Among the mourners was the reigning world flyweight champion Jackie Paterson, destined for an unhappy end himself. The pallbearers and clergyman needed help to get through the crowds to the graveside.

If anyone needed a reminder as to what had killed him, his father John provided it on the eve of his son's burial when he was arrested for a drunken row. John Lynch, 56, had travelled from London for his son's funeral but clashed with a man 20 years younger than him at a tram stop which earned him a £3 3s fine with the option of 30 days' imprisonment.

The inquests began and people started pointing fingers. Euan Wellwood, of the *Glasgow Evening Times*, claimed 'there

44 District of Govan Statutory Deaths Register

45 *The Guardian*, 10.8.1946

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were still large sums due to him for boxing engagements when he died' the day after the boxer's death. Annie claimed that George Dingley, the promoter, still owed her £135 in 1952⁴⁶. The amount was outstanding from a court judgement in Lynch's favour that Dingley owed the boxer £200 at five per cent interest.

The board paid the £31 15s funeral bill and in the following two years gave Annie £1 a week for each of her two sons. Lynch's total assets after his death amounted to £55 in outstanding debts to the boxer, it was disclosed in 1948⁴⁷, and Bobby does not deny that his father met a sad end after achieving global recognition for his boxing excellence.

'I'm upset that some took all his money and the way he died,' said Bobby, who was in his 70s when interviewed for this book in November 2013.

'When he died, he had no money. But no accountants take up boxing and a lot of people hung on to him because he had money. He was generous, I remember that of him, and people took advantage.

'If he had people round about him that would have taken care of his money, it may have been different. My mum wasn't good at watching his money. She had to stop asking him for things because he would just spend all their money. She had a diamond ring and after my father died she sold it and took us all on holiday to Morecambe.

'My mummy called him the "young boy". If she ever asked for something she would get it because he would go and get it.'

After Lynch's death Annie married Frank Docherty and went on to have grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Annie returned to Glasgow in 1985 to unveil a 6ft black granite memorial in memory to Benny⁴⁸. She died in a care home in Ontario, Canada on 20 April 2010⁴⁹.

46 *People*, 1952

47 *Evening Telegraph*, 7.5.1948

48 *Glasgow Herald*, 17.5.1985

49 *Toronto Star*, 21.4.2010

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Alcohol has accounted for the premature deaths of other world champions, such as Benny Lynch's contemporary and Mob-managed Primo Carnera, who held the world heavyweight title for less than year from 1933. After being exploited by his American handlers and without any of the \$900,000 he is estimated to have earned, Carnera returned to his native Italy where, a month later, he died of cirrhosis of the liver brought on by alcoholism in 1967, aged 60.

Lynch did not last as long as Carnera and he succumbed to the bottle at an earlier age. Alcohol had distinguished Lynch's childhood when his drunken father and promiscuous mother abandoned him and his brother. Lynch had the capacity to develop a drinking habit, which he quickly did as champion, and it led to his death as he neglected his own health in retirement. For Bobby Lynch, boxing is to blame for turning his father into a helpless alcoholic, more than his father's upbringing in the grim Gorbals of the early twentieth century.

'He missed the boxing,' said Bobby, who was living with his wife in Toronto and has two sons when we spoke.

'His last fight was very sad and it was very hard for him after that. Everywhere he went people would want to buy him a drink so the chances of him giving it up were remote. He tried giving up all the time. But it never materialised. He had jobs after boxing and I know he worked in the shipyard.

'Looking back he was always likely to die prematurely because of the things that happened to him, like when he was stripped of the titles on the scales. They had been telling him phoney weights in camp and for him to show up the next day at the weigh-in and be six and a half pounds overweight, that wasn't right. They could have called the fight off, pulled him out with an injury or 'flu, but for him to walk in there and discover he was way over the weight by so much was not right. They had fixed the scales in the training camps and there was a lot of money bet on boxing in those days so he just couldn't pull out like that. People had put bets on. If they were betting on him or against him, all that money would be lost if the fight didn't happen.

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‘The drink was part of the problem. But the life that he had was also to blame. They took the title away from him after his own people messed around with the scales leading up to the fight. When he got weighed in he said to one of them, “You’ve screwed me,” and he smashed the windows of his car outside after. He drove to my granny’s and he was looking for my mum. My granny says to my mum, “You better get hold of him because he’s in an awful mess.” It drove him to the drink again and affected him badly.

‘I think maybe boxing drove him to the drink. He also had a rough life away from boxing. His mother went away with another guy and his father was in the Army so always away. He lost his brother when he was young so his childhood was no joy for him. He got brought up by strangers. You have to imagine it was a very poor area the Gorbals at the time, and rather than put a child into a home, others would bring them up.’

Alcoholism ran in the Lynch blood. Like his father, Benny Lynch was a heavy drinker. So too was Benny Lynch’s other son, John.

‘My brother died of the drink too,’ said Bobby.

‘He was only 34, one year older than my father when he died. My mother and I went back to Scotland for the funeral. He got out of the hospital and they found him a month later in a stream that ran through the hospital. There was only a foot of water in the stream.’

Lynch became resigned to his own tragic conclusion as he neglected his own wellbeing. Just a week before he expired Lynch was seen flailing away in a boxing booth at Glasgow Green. Benny Lynch’s life had always been a struggle – before, during and after boxing – and on his headstone is inscribed a fitting tribute: *Always a fighter.*