

ADRIAN KNOTT

FOREWORD BY COLIN HART

THE

MIGHTY

ATOM

The Life of Boxing Legend

JIMMY WILDE



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CONTENTS

Foreword	7
Acknowledgements	11
Introduction	13
A Hungry Childhood	17
Meeting Dai Davies	26
Boxing Booth Fighter	34
Steady Progress	41
Full-Time Fighter	53
Debut At HQ	63
Contender	70
The Plymouth Prodigy	81
Tancy	91
Comeback	101
The Lonsdale Belt At Last	114
The Mystery Of Johnny Rosner	121
A Champion In Demand	131
The Zulu Kid	144
Sandhurst And A Bag Of Diamonds	158
Fighting The Allies	175
A Controversy Avenged	184
A North American Adventure	198
The Tiger Of New Orleans	210
Pancho	223
Boxing Celebrity. Boxing Legend	238
Jimmy Wilde's Fight Record	248
Jimmy Wilde's Tale Of The Tape	252
Bibliography	253

A Hungry Childhood

ONE MORNING in 1872, a group of well-dressed men got off a train at Quakers Yard, a sparsely populated hamlet six miles north of Pontypridd, deep in the Welsh valleys. Although the men were from London, they knew the exact place where they were going. They walked roughly one mile to a vast area of empty farmland.

Well over 3,000 acres of lush green land, which had the Taff Bargoed river running through it, stretched out in front of them. The men pointed in all directions, looked all around them and nodded in agreement before making their way back to the station.

One of the men who had visited that day was London businessman F.W. Harris. He had seen the potential to mine coal in the area and, in the autumn of 1872, he purchased the farmland and set to work on building a colliery.

Over the next four years, hundreds of men were employed to fell trees, dig shafts and put in place the two huge winding machines. The two shafts were 180ft apart and nearly 800 yards deep, making what would become known as Harris's Deep Navigation Colliery the deepest in south Wales at that time. Like many who had

set up mines in the vicinity, Harris named this new burgeoning community after himself. Harristown was born, although the locals preferred to use the Welsh translation of Treharris.

Within a decade, an uninhabited rural idyll had been transformed into a thriving town of just over 4,000 people. Men from all parts of south Wales and as far afield as Shropshire came to Treharris, either alone or with their families, in search of work.

One of these men was James Wilde. Born in 1867 in the nearby hamlet of Llanfabon, James Wilde had been a colliery labourer all his life. At the age of 23, he married a 19-year-old local woman named Margaret Evans in Newtown, Pontypridd. Within a year, they had settled in Treharris and had their first child, a daughter, Mary Anne.

For every family living in a mining town, life was unrelentingly hard, especially during the long, dark winter months. Many pit workers only saw daylight on Sundays, when they were not at work. Toiling underground was physically back-breaking, as well as being dangerous. Profit was all that really mattered to the mine owners who saw the workforce as easily replaceable. Every day, the men had to deal with the threat of flash floods, roof collapses, runaway coal wagons potentially crushing them and the fear of dying from the silent killer – carbon monoxide poisoning. The most common and unavoidable danger was pneumoconiosis. This developed in the lungs through breathing in tiny particles of coal dust. It was a condition that was debilitating and, ultimately, fatal.

The Wildes lived at 28 Webster Street, which was adjacent to Harris's colliery. James Wilde was an underground horse driver.

Also living in the same house was one James Thomas (who worked as a colliery timber man) and his wife, as well as their four young children. Living in such overcrowded conditions with next to no privacy was common at this time. The 1891 census states that there were 524 people living in 82 dwellings in Webster Street alone.

Typical of all couples at that time, James and Margaret were intent on raising a large family, despite the economic hardships they faced on a daily basis. Their second child would go on to be the most well known. James Edward Wilde was born on 12 May 1892 in a small chapel in nearby Quakers Yard. Three more children would follow: Catherine in 1896, Ellen Jane in 1899 and Elias in 1901.¹

In his autobiography, *Fighting Was My Business*, Jimmy would write of how the one over-riding and ever-present feeling he had when he was a small boy was that of hunger. ‘There were times, particularly during the strikes, when starvation was not far away.’²

It wasn’t only strikes in the mines that colliers had to worry about. A rail strike could be equally detrimental. No working railway meant the mine would have to close and the workers would be reliant on paltry relief payments which could not sustain a family for any length of time.

Despite its massive output of high quality coal, Harris’s colliery was not immune to strikes and other disputes which culminated in workers being laid off without notice. Both scenarios were economically crippling for families. During these

1 Most sources wrongly give Wilde’s date of birth as 15 May 1892

2 Jimmy Wilde *Fighting Was My Business* p.11

periods of unemployment, many families found themselves close to starvation. The Quakers would help by setting up makeshift soup kitchens at the end of the street and the Salvation Army brass band would march through the rows of terraced houses playing their instruments, hoping that the better-off would make a donation. Many fit and healthy men and women visibly lost weight during these desperate times. Some succumbed to illness and died.

It is difficult to know exactly when James and Margaret Wilde moved their young family out of Treharris. But move they did, roughly nine miles west, to Tylorstown in the Ferndale valley.

Tylorstown (just as Treharris had been) was an isolated area of farmland until Alfred Tylor made his way from London and purchased Pendyrus Farm in the early 1870s. Tylor built a colliery there and, with it, a new community. Long rows of small terraced houses were built, woven into the valleys, and this new town was named after the man who had formed it.

By the time James Wilde and his young family moved to Tylorstown, Pendyrus colliery was producing nearly 250,000 tonnes of coal per year. Between 1891 and 1901, the population of Tylorstown tripled to just over 3,000. This is where James Wilde would settle for the rest of his life. His son, through his deeds in the boxing ring, would make this small town in the Rhondda valley known throughout the world.

The 1901 census tells us that Jimmy's new home was a small terraced house at 8 Station Road. The houses were 'all alike to look at, all covered with the grime of the Rhondda valley'.³

3 Jimmy Wilde *Fighting Was My Business* p.12

Young Jimmy's earliest memories are that of his father returning home from working at the pit, his face black with coal dust, which accentuated the whiteness of his eyes. His father would wash off the dust and dirt in a tin bath placed in front of the open fire in their tiny living room. Margaret would always make sure her husband had a newly washed and ironed shirt to wear. To help pay the rent, many families took in a lodger (normally a fellow collier) who had recently arrived in the area. The Wildes were no exception.

The street outside his house was where young Jimmy, like all children, spent most of his time. He would play hopscotch and tick, skipping and jostling with the other boys and girls. Tylorstown, like all pit villages in south Wales, was a tough, uncompromising place. Money was in short supply and little affection was shown to children by their parents. They were counting down the days to when their offspring could start bringing in a wage.

Jimmy's small stature was the main reason he got into so many playground scraps when he was young. Bigger boys saw him as an easy target at first. What they didn't know was that Jimmy actually enjoyed the rough and tumble of combat. Although he seemed 'stunted and undernourished',⁴ Jimmy's frail physique helped him evade the blows and kicks that came his way. When he retaliated with fast – albeit light – blows, it caused his bigger assailants a great deal of frustration.

Tylorstown was just as deprived as Treharris had been and the threat of strikes was never far away. Nevertheless, Jimmy had a

4 Jimmy Wilde *Fighting Was My Business* p.12

cheerful attitude. Sometimes this was misconstrued as insolence, especially when he was at school and being disciplined for unruly behaviour or poor time-keeping. Being physically punished by a teacher never seemed to bother him or break his spirit.

Jimmy hated school and would do anything possible to avoid going. In a way, his family's economic hardship gave him a handy excuse for playing truant. Being out of school meant he and his eldest sister could find ways of supplementing the meagre family coffers.

One of the ways in which Jimmy and his sister, Mary Anne, raised some money came about purely by chance. One morning, Jimmy saw a gang of older lads carrying heavy sacks. Jimmy followed them at a safe distance and watched the boys as they carefully hid the sacks. Jimmy rushed home to tell his sister. They both went back to investigate. Jimmy and Mary Anne were expecting the sacks to be stuffed with rabbits, but they were filled to the brim with coal.

The following morning, Jimmy went to check on the sacks. They had gone. The three boys were caned for being late for school. Jimmy knew that they had spent the morning selling coal. The only problem Jimmy had was that he did not know where they had got the coal from. For the next four mornings, Jimmy woke at dawn and went looking for the boys. There was no sign of them. On the fifth morning, the boys went past his house and Jimmy and Mary Anne followed them to a coal tip. The tip was five miles from Station Road, but somehow Jimmy, all 4st of him, and his sister filled a sack they had brought with them with

three-quarters of a hundredweight of coal when the boys had gone and 'were in a state of collapse when we eventually reached Tylorstown'.⁵ Jimmy and Mary Anne got one shilling and nine pence when they sold the coal later that day.

Stealing and selling coal was born out of necessity for Jimmy and his sister. They soon realised that a ten-mile round trip was too much, so they tried their luck closer to home. This time it did not work out so well.

Early one morning, after filling up a sack, they were spotted as they crossed the railway track and Jimmy and Mary Anne only got away because their pursuer stumbled and fell. From now on, Mary Anne reasoned, they would never raid a coal tip fewer than five miles from home for fear of being recognised. That being said, sometimes a local pit man, sympathetic to the way things were, would turn a blind eye to Jimmy and Mary Anne or warn them of impending danger so that they had ample time to get away without being chased. Jimmy and Mary Anne did this for nearly a year until four local boys were arrested by the local constabulary. From now on, Jimmy and Mary Anne agreed, a safer way of making money would have to be devised.

During the summer months, Jimmy and his sister would rise at dawn and walk up to seven miles through the valleys to pick blackberries which they would later sell to their neighbours and people in the adjoining streets. If there was a strike and they had already sold all the blackberries, Jimmy and Mary Anne would make beer with dandelions and sell that instead. All of these money-

5 Jimmy Wilde *Fighting Was My Business* p.15

making ventures meant that Jimmy was invariably late for school. Many times he was reprimanded. But money had to be made.

Young Jimmy was still fighting in the playground, but it was in the street that fights had a little more riding on them; namely a packet of cigarettes, which cost one penny. These would be sold to the pit men. Boys would gather and form a ring around the two lads who were fighting and battle would commence. Because he was so tiny, Jimmy never had any backers, unlike the other boys. Nevertheless, he had a great ability to dodge and slip blows and then give some back. His slender frame belied a wiry toughness and invariably he would be the last one standing.

The boys Jimmy fought in the street were always heavier than him, but they would tire themselves out trying to hit him. Jimmy would then wade into them with blurring hand speed. The more fights Jimmy had, the more his exploits and fistic notoriety spread among his peers. 'I think my mother and father lived in fear of my getting into serious trouble,' he would later write.⁶

Although he enjoyed fighting, Jimmy did not have a boxing hero at this time, but he had seen boxing at the annual local fair. This aroused his interest in the noble art and he began reading boxing books, which he borrowed from the library. The playground scraps were the same sort of set-tos every boy all over the country had, but boxing was slowly becoming of more interest to him.

Jimmy would spend many an hour listening with great interest to an uncle or a grandfather of one of his school pals, who would

6 Jimmy Wilde *Fighting Was My Business* p.21

tell exciting tales of old Welsh bare-knuckle fighters who had become legends in the particular hamlet or village they had lived in. Scrapping, whether it be in the playground or in the street, was exciting – not to mention a way of earning money. What is more, it took Jimmy's mind off the day when he would have to leave school and work in the mines. The thought filled Jimmy with dread. 'One day school, the next day the pit head and the dreaded cage.'⁷

Jimmy's anxiety about going down the mines was exacerbated by the fact there were problems at home. His father's health was deteriorating, which meant he could not work. Living on Poor Relief and having to queue with the other poor souls coughing their lungs up as they waited to collect their money from the Board of Guardians at the local parish office was a strain, both physically and mentally. It was a severe blow to a man's pride to stand and wait for his name to be called out, but it had to be done. Pride alone would not put food on the table.

The lack of money coming in caused endless arguments between James and Margaret. She started to spend less time at the family home in Station Road and would often take the youngest children with her to stay with friends nearby.

7 Jimmy Wilde *Fighting Was My Business* p.24