



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## The demise of Jimmy Elliott



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'He had', according to the New York Times, 'not even that kind of honor which is said to be common among thieves. He was treacherous, ungrateful, cowardly, revengeful, mean, malignant, and as ugly in temper as he was in person.'

Those who knew him best loathed him the most.' He was 'a contemptible cur' who contained 'all the odious characteristics of the serpent warmed into life'. He was, the paper judged, 'a bad man' and it added the subjective, although seemingly heartfelt claim that 'Few worse men have ever lived.' So ran the New York Times obituary for James Elliott, an Athlone boxer who had once been the Heavyweight Champion of America.

### Ropes and bars

Elliott's early life is not well-documented. Many sources, such as the Dictionary of Irish Biography, state that he was born in Athlone in 1838, although others, such as some 19th-century American newspapers, say that he was born in 1845. When he was an infant, Elliott's family emigrated to New York, where he later worked various casual jobs before becoming part of an Irish street gang.

Elliott began prizefighting around 1860, engaging in multiple bare-knuckle bouts during a time when fights continued for dozens of

rounds. He spent time in New Jersey State Prison between 1863 and 1865 after being found guilty of multiple crimes, including robbery. In May 1867, he claimed the Heavyweight Championship of America, successfully defending the title in 1868. Elliott returned to prison during the 1870s, serving about nine years of a seventeen year sentence for the violent robbery of Hughie Dougherty, a well-known African-American singer. At least one newspaper later claimed that Elliott was also found guilty of shooting dead a policeman during the attack on Dougherty but that report may not be accurate.

In 1882, Elliott had his most famous bout – one that we covered in an earlier article – when he fought John L. Sullivan, the world-renowned Irish-American boxer. To call their New York encounter a fight is a misnomer, given that Sullivan pummelled Elliott. In the third round, Sullivan caught Elliott with an uppercut that, in the words of a ringside reporter, 'completely ruined that gentleman as an antagonist' and brought the fight to an end. The two men's paths diverged from this point. Sullivan continued his journey towards legendary status while Elliott would soon face his final confrontation.

### Personal and poisonous

In January 1883, Elliott became entangled in a dispute with Harry Hill, a well-known New York sports promoter who had recently arrived in Chicago, where Elliott was then residing. In an interview with local newspapers, Hill insulted Elliott, whom he called 'a big bag of wind'.

Elliott sought redress by going to Hill's hotel with, as one newspaper put it, the 'alleged purpose of whipping him'. Although Elliott was accompanied by 'a few New York and Boston bruisers', Hill escaped unharmed.

All of this took place in front of newspaper reporters, who interviewed Elliott outside Hill's hotel. Elliott took the opportunity to single out Jerry Dunn, who was one of Hill's extensive entourage of professional gamblers, boxers and hired thugs. Dunn, a gambler and racehorse owner, was about forty years old and, apart from his sporting endeavours, was known for killing a notorious criminal named Jim Logan, a feat for which he served two years in prison. Dunn had, apparently, been badmouthing Elliott to local reporters. In turn, Elliott told the press that Dunn was a fraud and a coward. A public feud was born, one in which weapons would soon replace words.

During the evening of 1 March 1883, Elliott went into Chicago's Tivoli restaurant and saloon. With Elliott was Fred Plaisted, a well-known professional rower. The pair took a table in the Tivoli's inner-dining room, with Elliott's seat facing the entrance. There were around a dozen customers in the room, a mixture of men and women. Not long after, Dunn entered the Tivoli armed with at least one gun. He walked to the inner room, raised a revolver and fired once or twice at Elliott.

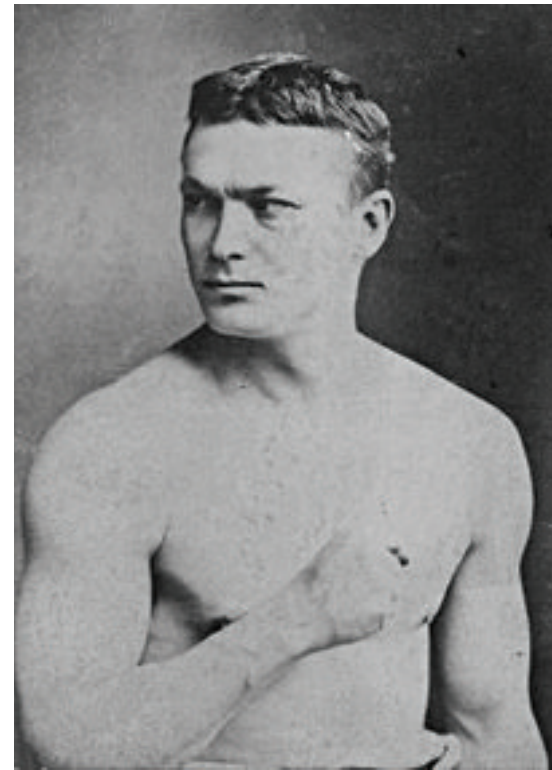
### To the end

It is unclear whether Dunn's first shots hit or missed their target. Elliott jumped up and grabbed a chair,

which he swung at his assailant. The chair caught a glass chandelier on the ceiling, causing a rain of shattered glass to fall upon the advancing Elliott. Dunn retreated towards the front room, firing another one or two shots before he was grabbed by Elliott. Here, they grappled each other to the floor before rising again. By now, Elliott was brandishing a handgun. A few accounts claim that Elliott always carried a gun and was armed on the night of Dunn's attack, some state that Plaisted intervened and handed Elliott a gun, while others suggest that Elliott wrestled the gun from Dunn.

Still locked together, Elliott and Dunn fell to the floor again. More shots were fired, although witnesses could not say by whom, before Elliott and Dunn regained their footing. Dunn, according to his own account, 'could scarcely stand' by this point. For a few seconds, the two men stood apart. Dunn raised his weapon to fire at Elliott but his 'gun stuck and would not revolve'. Elliott aimed his gun at Dunn but it jammed. Dunn, having manually revolved the barrel of his gun, stepped forward, pushed his weapon into Elliott's stomach and pulled the trigger. To the sound of the gun firing, he knocked Elliott backwards onto a table from which they both slid off. There they lay. Elliott on the floor, Dunn on top. Dunn would survive, Elliott would not.

It took the intervention of two policemen, officers Coughlin and Dennehy, to prise Dunn and Elliott apart. The extent of Elliott's wounds were now clear. He had been hit at least once in the stomach



James Elliott, boxer and Heavyweight Champion of America

and was bleeding to death. Dunn had been hit by two bullets: once to his left arm, while the other had grazed his forehead. About fifteen minutes later, the police put Elliott in a wagon and set off for a nearby hospital. After a short distance, they changed course and headed instead for the city morgue. James Elliott had died of his wounds.

Dunn would be acquitted of Elliott's murder before subsequently killing another man. Elliott's death and the manner in which it occurred was a big story in the USA, with newspapers providing detailed witness accounts. Alongside listing his many crimes, a number of papers reported that Elliott had

made 'good use of his spare time when locked up'. He was, according to the Indianapolis Journal, 'well read and very intelligent, having a good knowledge of several languages, living and dead'. Yet, despite his linguistic abilities, brutality was Elliott's primary mode of expression. That violence and his status as a leading prize-fighter fascinated reporters. As much as they professed to despise Elliott, newspapers such as the New York Times revelled in the gory details of his life and death. It was Elliott's consequent fame that leads us to the last chapter in his story, one to which we will return in a later article: his epic funeral in New York City.

