Sweet William: The Life of Billy Conn
By Andrew O’Toole
(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008)
Illustrations, bibliography, index, xi, 376 pp.
$32.95 hardcover

In an age when boxing has almost entirely disappeared from the daily sports pages, Andrew O’Toole’s recent book about one of Pittsburgh’s greatest pugilists has received a substantial amount of local press. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, City Paper, and Tribune-Review all positively reviewed Sweet William: The Life of Billy Conn. Each provided detailed content synopses of the book—which will not be repeated here—and shared glowing praise for O’Toole’s excellent narration of the life and times of Pittsburgh’s Billy Conn, the light heavyweight champion of the world known for his near upset of heavyweight Joe Louis in 1941.

Sweet William is indeed a good book. The strength, however, lies not in that it breaks new ground in boxing scholarship. The life and career of Billy Conn have already been told. Frank Deford’s classic 1985 Sports Illustrated article, “The Boxer and the Blonde,” masterfully captured Conn’s character, the details of the Joe Louis fight, and his courtship of lifetime sweetheart Mary Louise. It ranks as one of the greatest pieces of sports writing of all time. More recently, Paul Kennedy’s encyclopedic Conn biography The Pittsburgh Kid covered the same content and used the same source material as O’Toole’s book. The Billy Conn story has also been explored in museums, namely the International Boxing Hall of Fame in Canastota, New York, and the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum in Pittsburgh. There, visitors can view artifacts, photographs, and film footage that illuminate Conn’s illustrious career and his place in boxing history.

Though it narrates the life of an already documented boxer, Sweet William is a valuable work because of the author’s prowess as a gifted storyteller. The reader feels ringside when Conn goes round after round against a bigger, heavier Louis, nearly winning what might have been the biggest upset in boxing history. All of Conn’s important fights are narrated with similar detail. Places like Pittsburgh’s Forbes Field and New York’s Polo Grounds are resurrected by O’Toole’s lively prose, providing a nostalgic trip into a bygone era of America’s sporting past. The author also succeeds in his character portraits of Conn’s relatives, opponents, promoters, trainers, and friends. His bold, yet heartbreaking description of Conn’s mental debilitation in the final years of his life succeeds in drawing attention to the ultimate price that champions often pay for their greatness.

O’Toole’s conventional, biographical approach, however, appeals more to the casual reader and less to those with an in-depth interest in the larger study of boxing history. According to Jeffrey Sammons, author of Beyond the Ring: The Role of Boxing in American Society, fight-by-fight biographies of individual fighters are “subject to an extremely short time frame, and by isolating and emphasizing the contributions of one individual, they tend to understate the importance of events, institutions, and societal change in the course of history.” Because O’Toole approaches his subject in strictly biographical terms, Sweet William sticks largely to the facts and rarely raises larger questions of interest.

The themes of race and ethnicity, for example, are ripe for discussion in any work dealing with Conn. Though the author touches on racial tensions by mentioning how the public clamored for a “White Hope” in young Billy Conn during his quest to defeat Louis, the theme of race could have been explored in greater detail.
The scholarly reader may also desire more detail about Conn’s status as an icon to his ethnic community—the Irish Americans. O’Toole mentions the “Ham and Cabbage Express” trains that brought fans to New York to see Conn bouts, but he does not thoroughly explore its meaning within the larger context of Irish American ethnicity. Nor does he fully address the historical context by placing Conn as one individual in a long line of great fighters to spring from Irish roots. Finally, one would like to know how Conn’s skill level compares with both his contemporaries and fighters from other eras, and how he fits into the larger history of the sport of boxing. Was he one of the greatest of all time? Did he change the sport in any significant degree? Such evaluative explorations, even though subjective, are highly desirable to sports historians.

A reader with a specific interest in Pittsburgh might like to see more contextual exploration of the city and region and its place in boxing history. O’Toole does a great descriptive job painting Pittsburgh as a place where boxing fans were as rabid and informed as today’s Steelers fans. But what is missing is an exploration of how and why Pittsburgh was a veritable boxing haven in Conn’s day. O’Toole does not explore the fact that Billy Conn won his world title in the same short three-year time frame that four other Western Pennsylvania fighters also earned world titles. Was this serendipity? Or, was it due to some other larger issue? Also greatly needed is biographical material on the other great fighters who came out of Pittsburgh in this same period. O’Toole mentions some, like Conn’s friend Fritzie Zivic and local nemesis Teddy Yarosz. Details on other Conn contemporaries from Western Pennsylvania like Sammy Angott, Billy Soose, Tony Marino, Jackie Wilson, and Charley Burley are largely absent from the book. In focusing narrowly on Conn and not branching out to include research on these other championship boxers, the author has missed a great opportunity to tell larger stories that would help to fill an undocumented aspect of Pittsburgh’s sporting history.

Understandably, though, all authors are limited by scope. And by narrowing his focus, O’Toole has succeeded in doing one thing extremely well. Indeed, *Sweet William* is the definitive biographical work on Billy Conn and a must-read for anyone interested in learning more about the life and times of this great fighter and great man. It also provides a solid foundation upon which boxing historians with an interest in Pittsburgh’s place in the history of the sport can build.

Nicholas Ciotola is a curator at the Heinz History Center.
During the middle part of the 20th century when television was in its infancy, programming was available in only two major areas. New York networks delivered media to the east coast, and Chicago brought programs to the midwest. In January 1949, Pittsburgh linked the two. From Pittsburgh's first television station, WDTV, this unification was televised on all existing networks through a program called “The Golden Spike,” a metaphor signifying the connection between the two cities.

Eleanor Schano was present as this historic event took place. She and her father watched the broadcast from outside a drugstore window. Even at her young age, Schano knew she was watching history and was determined to be a part of it. Skills gained through modeling, landed her an on-air role when she was just a teenager. As she advanced further into the profession, Schano quickly learned that even in its infancy the television industry “clearly separated the broadcasters from the broads.” In her memoir, she recalls these events along with many others that influenced her personal and professional life both on and off the air.

Most women of the 1950s spent their time preparing for a life of domesticity, not in pursuit of careers. Starting off as a commercial model, Schano’s understanding of the female role in society helped to keep her working in the television industry and landed her additional jobs in the positions of “Weather Girl” and “TV Game Show Babe.” Her role fulfilled a female stereotype and the overall marketing strategy of the networks: “Put a pretty girl on the tube and people will watch her.” Schano discovered, however, that it just wasn’t that easy. Each chapter of the book discusses at least one of the hurdles she had to overcome, sometimes simply to get an interview for a position.

The author’s understanding of the changes in society prompted her to conceive, produce, and host a program, The Vanishing Female, which focused on the roles of women before World War II and their ongoing transformation. Schano was part of this transformation and adapted her life as needed. She wrote, “even back in the early days of the 1960s, I felt there was some message to share, something about the changing role of women in our society....” As her career grew, Schano was able to use what many considered a disadvantage in her favor. For example, Schano relates her ability to connect with her interviewees—particularly females—differently than her male colleagues, which at times gave her the edge she needed to gain interviews. In addition, she found opportunities for interviews in obscure places, including the women’s bathroom.

Today, both male and female personalities dominate the television screen and are held equally important in the public’s view. Toward the book’s conclusion, Schano offers other women in broadcasting the opportunity to tell their stories about entering the television
industry. Their accounts are welcome but sobering statements of women’s achievements in the professional arena balanced against what must yet be achieved. The comments also serve as reminders that women are not alone as they move into new fields.

Riding the Airwaves is overflowing with anecdotes and personal photographs that show Schano’s growth as a person along with the expansion of the broadcasting industry. Through her autobiography, Schano allows the reader into her world, sharing her stories of overcoming gender bias, loves lost and found, as well as other hardships and triumphs along the way. It is a story of social change, cultural transformation, and technological advances, which all encompass the balance between personal and professional life. These experiences certainly make Riding the Airwaves a recommended read for those interested in the television industry, gender relations, or just looking to know a little more about Pittsburgh’s rich history.

Stephanie Walsh is the director of Curatorial Affairs for the Battleship New Jersey Museum & Memorial in Camden, New Jersey. She received a Master of Arts degree from Duquesne University in History; Archival, Museum & Editing Studies.

The first edition of this book was reviewed a few years ago, but the third edition has more than doubled in size and expanded its coverage. The early edition was concerned with the discovery of oil and the succeeding boom in Clarion and Venango counties. The expanded edition includes Armstrong and Butler counties as well. The book is filled with stories, usually less than a page long, that describe the people, places, and events of the new oil industry in the last half of the 19th century. Pithole is often thought...
It’s clear Jeff Mitchell knows the Allegheny National Forest. This hiking book is thorough, with personalized descriptions for each trail hiked. Mitchell rates each trail’s difficulty and points out not-to-be-missed highlights like waterfalls and spectacular views. A handy guide if you’re near the Forest and want to stop for a short one-hour stroll or plan a difficult two-day hike. —Sherrie Flick

Henderson Township Commemorative History, 1857 – 2007
Edited by Shirley J. Sharp
(Punxsutawney, Pa.: Shirley J. Sharp, 2007)
Illustrations, maps, index, v, 117 pp., $19.00 softcover

It is rare to find a commemorative book for a town, city, or township that is as full of useful information as this. Henderson Township is located in Jefferson County on the border with Clearfield County. It’s a rural area with only one town, Big Run. The editor has compiled every possible area of interest—churches and pastors, schools and teachers, businesses and landowners—from the beginning of the township to present day. It’s nice to see a small, overlooked area receive such comprehensive coverage. —Art Louderback

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—Art Louderback

of when there are discussions of towns that existed and then disappeared, but there were many places that quickly became cities but have now shrunk to the size of towns and hamlets. Here you will find the stories of the rise and contraction of places such as Karns City and Foxburg. Oil on the Brain is an important volume to help celebrate the 150th anniversary of oil’s discovery in Titusville.

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Hiking the Allegheny National Forest: Exploring the Wilderness of Northwestern Pennsylvania

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