

Harry Wills

E. E. Cummings

[Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1823.6: Prose (13) Harry Wills. TS.; [1926] 5s. (5p.)]

On the evening of October twelfth, in the year of grace nineteen hundred and twenty-six, certainly twenty-five thousand persons (not excluding the present writer) visited a certain baseball park to see a certain negro fight a certain white man and were certainly disappointed. Not that a fight didn't occur. It occurred, however, outside the gates and ended with the highly desirable elimination of the Brooklyn police by the gate-crashing mob.

What happened in the ring has been stated by "sport writers" somewhat in these terms: Harry Wills, coloured, forty (?) years old, six feet two inches tall, weighing two hundred fourteen and a half pounds, was disqualified by referee Patsy Haley, white and white-haired, in the thirteenth round of a scheduled fifteen round bout with Jack Sharkey, white, twenty-six years old, six feet tall, weighing one hundred and eighty pounds. The winner is described as "a Boston Lithuanian who has adopted an Irish nom de cauliflower." Concerning the loser, we read: "Wills will go down in ring history as the man who got rich wanting to fight Dempsey. There is no reason to feel sorry for Harry. He came as close to getting something for nothing as anybody you could name off hand. He hasn't fought much for years. He didn't fight much last night. He never will have to fight much and he has the money for it in the bank. Lucky Harry and unlucky Jack!"

Having myself seen this "fight" I should like to say something else about Wills. I must insist that the Wills-Sharkey encounter was not what the so-called experts think. They went to a fight and they saw a "massacre" or some such trifle. I went to a fight and I watched a fearfully and wonderfully orchestrated statue, beautifully moving in three dimensions, rapidly and surely and mysteriously become a two-dimensional caricature. Watching, I realized that the technique through which this metamorphosis accomplished itself—the fact that a huge-handed, hotly hammering, half-hysterical mechanism participated in this disintegration of a work of art—was unimportant. Say what you please, when something noble disappears the significance of the disappearance is reflexive; the meaning or verb of existence, which otherwise hides behind either an active or passive chastity, emerges for one lustful moment in its actual, third or middle voice. To dispute the truth that Wills, fluently erect in the squared circle of his doom, was noble, is the prerogative of those who cannot feel.



E. E. Cummings' notebook sketch of Harry Wills, pencil on paper, dated 10 / 12 / 26. [Rody Hall sketchbook, private collection]

Even mere facts demonstrate this nobility. For something like seven years Harry Wills tried to fight one man for one reason, the man being James Harrison (Jack) Dempsey and the reason being that Dempsey held the “heavyweight championship of the world”. For something like seven years this “champion”, Dempsey, refused to fight Wills, who meanwhile turned his attention to lesser luminaries whom he extinguished easily. Nowadays we hear that Wills never was a fighter because the only men whom he met were “setups”. Supposing this to be true, the boxing commission which failed to make Dempsey defend his title has no alibi. The

truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is, that the rulers of the fight-game feared a negro might again wear the crown once sported by Jack Johnson. For this reason and no other, Harry Wills of Harlem did not get his chance.

It has also been claimed that Wills is, or was, a dirty fighter. In this connection, I beg to opine that anyone who so accuses Wills is either completely ignorant of prizefighting or is a moron, unless he is [un]fortunately both. The vigor of my opinion may be due to the fact that I saw Tiger Flowers (a violin-playing negro deacon) win the middleweight championship from Harry Greb who, knowing himself licked, indulged freely in the forbidden trick of poking his thumb in his opponent's eye.¹ Or it may be due to the fact that, while I do not pretend to know as much as the so-called experts, I cannot help knowing how precariously the very existence of prizefighting in New York state hangs by the following thread: if the negroes get in, the "dirt" will get out. Or it may be due to the fact that I seem to remember Dempsey's use of the nefarious "rabbit" punch when an opponent was already en route to the canvass. Or again, it may be due to the fact that I visited Ebbets Field on October twelfth and saw Sharkey bawl out his apologetic referee for not making the overreprimanded and thoroughly flustered Wills behave. Incidentally, I and a number of others saw Sharkey commit much naughtiness at his sweet leisure. To quote no less conservative an authority than Mr. James W. (Jim) Jennings: "Haley (the referee) while he must be commended for his courage² in stopping the match, did harass the puzzled Wills with admonitions when the coloured man had not offended and failed to caution Sharkey when the latter, fired by Wills's illegal tactics, resorted to tricks of the same variety." And finally, let no one forget that the recent Dempsey-Tunney bout was, from its very inception, generally suspected of being "in the bag"—nay, even Dempsey himself took pains to tell the world that everything would be "on the up and up" since he could make more money by winning the match than by "throwing" (one million dollars if he won, versus a mere three hundred sixty thousand dollars if he "did a brodie").³ Such being the "sport" known as "fighting", to cast dirt at Harry Wills strikes your humble servant as a slightly affected gesture.

Should we be capable of preventing it, Harry Wills shall not be remembered "as the man who got rich wanting to fight Dempsey", but rather as a chromatic colossus, saturated by glare and din, who aims magnificent arms at an unobserving Heaven in token of his proudly attempted obedience to those fulsome and brittle laws which no inch of his musically muscular body possibly might understand. In what this creature failed to possess there was perhaps too much glory—and surely there was too little honour. In what he had, however, there lurked something beyond even honour. The mannerless manner of his unmoving and of his moving, the prodigious deli-

cacy of always total poise,even the crisp structure of those irrevocable shoulders,are things too firm for perishing,we guess,as they are too deep for telling. Punished by age and guttering before the onslaughts of a secondrate rival,the immaculate futility of his strength became extraordinary beyond strength itself. Therefore he is unknowable;therefore he cannot pass,if any angle harbours shadow or if any curve resists knowledge or if what is ugly triumphs in order to die,but must live,with the beautiful and with the defeated,in a different victory.

Notes

1. About the Tiger Flowers/Harry Greb fight, Cummings wrote: “On February 26, ’26, in a circus-theatre bulging with incredible thousands of human and nonhuman unbeings and beings, a Negro deacon named Tiger Flowers won the middleweight championship of the world. Mr. Flowers (who moves pleasantly, fights cleanly, and plays the violin) said:
‘Harry [Greb] stuck his thumb in my eye once, but it may have been an accident for he fought a clean fight after that. The only thing that I didn’t like was that used some profane language at times. But I guess he was a little excited’.”
 (“Theatre II,” *Miscellany* 148/161-62)
2. Wills was a heavy favorite,but nearly all bets were made with the understanding that if the decision was rendered on a foul they were automatically cancelled. [Cummings’ note]
3. On September 23, 1926, Gene Tunney beat Jack Dempsey in a ten-round unanimous decision, winning the heavyweight title. Most of the betting was on Dempsey to win. [Editor’s note]

Editor’s Note:

Harry Wills (1889–1958), nicknamed “The Black Panther,” was a heavyweight boxer whose fight against the contender Jack Sharkey was something of a last-ditch effort to gain a title bout with the then-reigning heavyweight champion, Jack Dempsey. At 37 years of age, Wills was past his prime and had been denied the chance to fight Dempsey before, doubtless because of his race. (Since Jack Johnson held the heavyweight crown in 1910, no African American had been allowed to contend for the title.)

This essay was edited from a fairly clean five-page typescript (four pages of text plus a title page) that Cummings may have attempted to publish in *Vanity Fair*. (Although Cummings published “How I Do Not Love Italy”

in *Vanity Fair* in October 1926 and “The Tabloid Newspaper” in December 1926, no article by Cummings appeared in the November issue.) Why the essay remained unpublished is not known, but perhaps its serious tone and subject matter put off the *Vanity Fair* editors. Cummings took some care composing “Harry Wills.” Another section of the Houghton Library catalogue mentions at least three drafts for the essay: “MS Am 1892.6 Prose (49). Harry Wills. TS. (with A.MS. revisions) and TS. (carbon copy); [n.p., n.d.] 12s. (16p.) Includes 3 drafts.”

The web site Box Rec reproduces the following account of the fight:

https://boxrec.com/media/index.php/Jack_Sharkey_vs._Harry_Wills

Jack Sharkey vs. Harry Wills

Jack Sharkey 188 lbs beat Harry Wills 214½ lbs by DQ at 0:43 in round 13 of 15

- Date: 1926-10-12
- Location: Ebbets Field, Brooklyn, New York, USA
- Referee: Patsy Haley

“Harry Wills tonight came unexpectedly to the turning of the road in his long pursuit of heavyweight honors. After a year's absence from the ring, the 38-year-old was disqualified in the 13th round of a 15-round match against Jack Sharkey for illegal use of the back hand blow. Wills was a hopelessly beaten man when the end came. In spite of the fact that he conceded 26½ pounds to his famous foe, Sharkey carried the battle to the veteran from the outset, outspeeding, outboxing and even outpunching the man who was almost universally recognized as Jack Dempsey's outstanding rival. Close to 45,000 spectators in the Brooklyn National League Park saw Wills decisively whipped all the way. Although the finish was a disappointment, it did not affect the decisiveness of Sharkey's victory. Wills was a sorry spectacle as he was waved to his corner. His left eye was nearly closed, a deep gash bled profusely over his right eye and from cuts around the nose and mouth. From the 4th round on, he was battling defensively, hanging on desperately under fire of Sharkey's battering blows. Wills had been warned repeatedly by referee Patsy Haley for unfair tactics. But it was the back-hand punch which Wills drew across Sharkey's face in a clinch that provided the specific grounds for the verdict.” —Associated Press

- The AP scorecard gave only the 3rd round to Wills and had the 2nd round even. The rest was scored for Sharkey.

Works Cited

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- . “The Tabloid Newspaper.” *Vanity Fair* December 1926. Rpt. *A Miscellany Revised*. 169-173. Rpt. *A Miscellany*. 184-188.
- “Jack Sharkey vs. Harry Wills.” *Box Rec Wiki Encyclopedia* (23 August 2012). Web.