
Shaping 'The Fighter' into an Oscar contender

By Kathy Shiels Tully

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Everyone who loves Lowell is cheering for "The Fighter," which is up for seven Academy Awards tonight. Though Dorchester-born Mark Wahlberg, who plays "Irish" Micky Ward, wasn't nominated for Best Actor, his indefatigable passion steered this project through Hollywood's lefts and rights to the award-winning final round, which will be broadcast live on ABC.

If you ask Bob Halloran, whose book "Irish Thunder: The Hard Life and Times of Micky Ward" tells the story of the local scrapper's ups and downs, there's one more character the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences overlooked: the city of Lowell.

Triumph, failure, and renewal are themes in Lowell's story, too. The city stood proud when the Civil War broke out, Halloran wrote, as "the second largest city in New England and the industrial center of the United States."

But times changed with the centuries. "I'd say it was troubled, depressed, and culturally divided," Halloran said of Ward's time growing up there in the '70s. It was "wild, violent, and lawless," Halloran wrote, a "town where boxers breed."

Halloran, of Milton, wrote his book with the idea of Lowell as the "star."

"I wanted to show the comparisons," he said, "that while Dickie [Eklund, Ward's half-brother] had a rise, he had a fall. Micky, too. So did Lowell in the early '90s."

"Today, Lowell is beautiful, thriving, but still a little rough."

Bernard Lynch, Lowell's city manager, saw the connection between the fighters and the city in the film. "It's interesting; the movie reflects our views."

"Lowell is a mill town, a hard-working city. It's had its struggles. The movie reflected Micky and Dickie's own lives and struggles, and Lowell's, too. Like Micky and Dickie, Lowell fought back. It never quit."

"It's a different city now than shown in the movie, with boarded-up mills, crack houses. Today we're known around the world as a city that's rebuilt itself."

Halloran, a weekend news anchor and sportscaster for WCVB-TV (Ch. 5) in Boston, served as technical consultant for "The Fighter," which for many nonboxing fans has popularized Ward's comeback, climaxed in a May 2002 battle dubbed "The Fight of the Year," in which he won a decision over Arturo "Thunder" Gatti to capture the world light welterweight title.

The two fighters would lock horns twice more in what became known as the Ward-Gatti Trilogy, with Ward beaten badly in a November 2002 decision, and then again in June 2003, despite Gatti breaking his right hand in the fourth round. It was Ward's last fight.

The film was shot in Lowell in the summer of 2009, and a debut screening was held in the city Dec. 9. With "The Fighter's" success at the box office, interest in "Irish Thunder" is resurging. The initial 10,000 hardcover copies are now collectors' items, said Halloran. The themes in Micky's deep, complicated story of family, betrayal, brotherly love, tragedy, triumph, being an underdog, perseverance, and redemption, set against a boxing backdrop, resonate with nonboxing fans. Think

“Rocky” for the new millennium.

Like Lowell, Micky rebounded, earning his GED, marrying his girlfriend, Charlene, in 2005 (played by Amy Adams, nominated for Best Actress in a Supporting Role, in the film), helping many through his Team Micky Ward Charities, and settling down in a humble home a few blocks from where he grew up.

How “Irish Thunder” came about is a story in itself. Halloran searched for another subject after his first book, “Destiny Derailed” — about the 2003 Red Sox’s pennant loss to the New York Yankees

— was published in 2004, when the Red Sox

beat their archrivals. Boxing came to mind. “It was like a lightning bolt kind of thing,” Halloran said. “I knew about Micky for a good 10 years from when he fought a Providence fighter, Louis Veader, when I was still working in Providence.”

Googling “Micky Ward,” plenty of stories popped up. Halloran googled “boxing gyms” and “Lowell.” The West End Gym came up. Halloran cold-called the gym, owned by Arthur Ramalho. Did anyone know how he could get in touch with Micky Ward?

“Gotta pen?” was the response.

Halloran called, and Ward consented to letting him write his biography. “It all happened within 30 minutes,” Halloran said.

Though he knew a movie project was underway, Halloran began his research in August 2005 and finished in September 2006. Quelling his own emotions and judgment, Halloran wrote a thoroughly researched story, never knowing if it would ever be published, weaving hard facts with plentiful quotes from Ward and those close to him. There were numerous rejections, but Lyons Press responded. In November 2007, “Irish Thunder” was on the shelves.

Shortly after, Halloran received a call from Scott Silver, a screenwriter for “The Fighter,” who also was researching Ward’s story. Halloran became a technical consultant and is acknowledged in the movie’s credits.

Readers compliment Halloran’s book for having more details than the film. “There’s a lot more layers to the story,” he said.

His book also takes a more realistic view of Eklund, Ward’s older brother, whom he revered, played by Christian Bale in the film. “The movie had to tone him down,” Halloran said. “In real life, Dickie was much darker.”

Halloran hopes Ward comes across in the book “as someone who survived in the eye of a hurricane. Micky stayed focused, clean, and sober, when there were so many role models to lead him in the wrong direction.”

As for predicting “The Fighter’s” Oscar outcome, Halloran said, “I’d like it to win [Best Film]. It’s an underdog, but you know, Micky was an underdog. I think it’s a lock for Christian Bale [Best Supporting Actor nominee]. I would love Scott Silver [Original Screenplay, nominated with Paul Tamasy and Eric Johnson] to win. He’s a great guy.”

Bob Halloran is scheduled to speak at the Melrose Public Library at 7:30 p.m. Thursday.