

# Les Darcy

## AND A LOCKET



Recently the National Museum of Australia accepted a donation of a small locket belonging to the former fiancée of Australia's 'Golden Boy' of boxing, Les Darcy. Darcy's story was one of heroism and tragedy, but this small locket, which

contains a portrait of Darcy and a lock of his hair, tells something about Australia during the upsetting years of the First World War.

Les Darcy was born into a poor Irish Catholic family in East Maitland in New South Wales in 1895. Fighting his first few rounds in a makeshift boxing ring in 1910, Darcy began to develop a flawless reputation. He proved his mettle when he claimed the Australian middleweight title from Mick King at Sydney Stadium in June 1915, and moved to Sydney to focus on his boxing career. Obtaining a part-time job as a barman at the Lord Dudley Hotel in Paddington, Darcy began to court the hotelier Willie O'Sullivan's daughter, Winnie, who soon became his fiancée.

Darcy became an Australian household name after he defeated America's Eddie McGoorty, the leading contender for the world middleweight crown. In 1916, he went on to defeat other highly ranked Americans, such as Harold Hardwick, which led to worldwide fame.

During his rapid rise to national and international stardom, the dissonance of global events had a tremendous impact on the boxer. In April 1915, Australia's role in the First World War was initiated when Australian troops were bloodied on the shores of Gallipoli. Despite an initial massive boom in recruitment for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), initial enthusiasm for the war petered out. Challenged with maintaining a full-strength fighting force, Prime Minister Billy Hughes proposed that conscription be put to the Australian people in a referendum. This ultimately divided Australian society, and in particular exacerbated the rift between Protestants and Catholics, who were seen as anti-conscription.



Photo: George Serras

A tour of the United States seemed pre-ordained for the young Darcy. Such a trip provided an opportunity to establish himself as a world champion and offered greater financial support for his family. Darcy rejected approaches from the promoter Hugh McIntosh who had tried to keep him in the country, who then spread rumours that the boxer was leaving to avoid military service in the AIF. The smear worked. A young, fit and healthy example of Australian manhood, Darcy symbolised all Australian men who were shirking their duty of serving their country. The irony was that Darcy had previously attempted to enlist, but the under-aged boxer was unable to get permission from his parents.

Against these odds, Darcy still pressed for a tour of the United States. Since all males of military age were prohibited from leaving the country without government approval, Darcy stowed away on a ship bound for America in October on the eve of the first conscription referendum. Darcy was publicly denounced, and matters were made worse when he arrived in the United States to learn of an irate Australian public, and to discover that he had been banned from fighting.

Darcy fell ill in April 1917 as a result of bad dental work he had received in Australia, and died at the age of twenty-one, poisoned by septicaemia. News reached Australia several days after his death, and, reversing its mood of persecution of Darcy, the nation fell into deep mourning. When Darcy's embalmed body arrived in Sydney from the United States, hundreds of thousands of people filed past his open casket in six public viewings. In death, all had been forgotten, and he was finally put to rest at the East Maitland cemetery.

The family of Winnie O'Sullivan made the donation of the locket to the National Museum late last year. Darcy was Winnie O'Sullivan's first love, and he would remain a painful memory until the last years of her life. According to her son, she carried the locket with her wherever she went.

At once fascinating yet saddening, this once cherished locket is a small window into the private lives of Les Darcy and Winnie O'Sullivan. Whilst it speaks of the grief that Darcy's fiancée endured after his death in 1917, it exemplifies the effects of the divisions caused by the First World War on both famous and ordinary Australians.

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