

# REVIEWS by John Exshaw

The Gifted One: Kirkland Laing Through The Eyes Of Others, by Oliver Jarratt [www.oliverjarratt.com](http://www.oliverjarratt.com)

## A special book about a special fighter

For those who want an in-depth book on one of the most talented fighters in British boxing history, this is a dream come true

Having previously remarked in this column that there seemed no good reason why a book on Kirkland Laing should not be as fascinating, in its own way, as one on Mike Tyson, it was with particular interest that I greeted the arrival of Oliver Jarratt's *The Gifted One: Kirkland Laing Through the Eyes of Others*. For although my original comment was, if memory serves, nothing more than a quixotically doomed attempt to encourage British houses to at least consider the possibility of publishing books about somebody other than Muhammad Ali, the fact that it was Laing who came to mind as an example is indicative of the special place this most mercurial and maddening of fighters still occupies in the memories of those who witnessed the highs and lows of his extraordinary career.

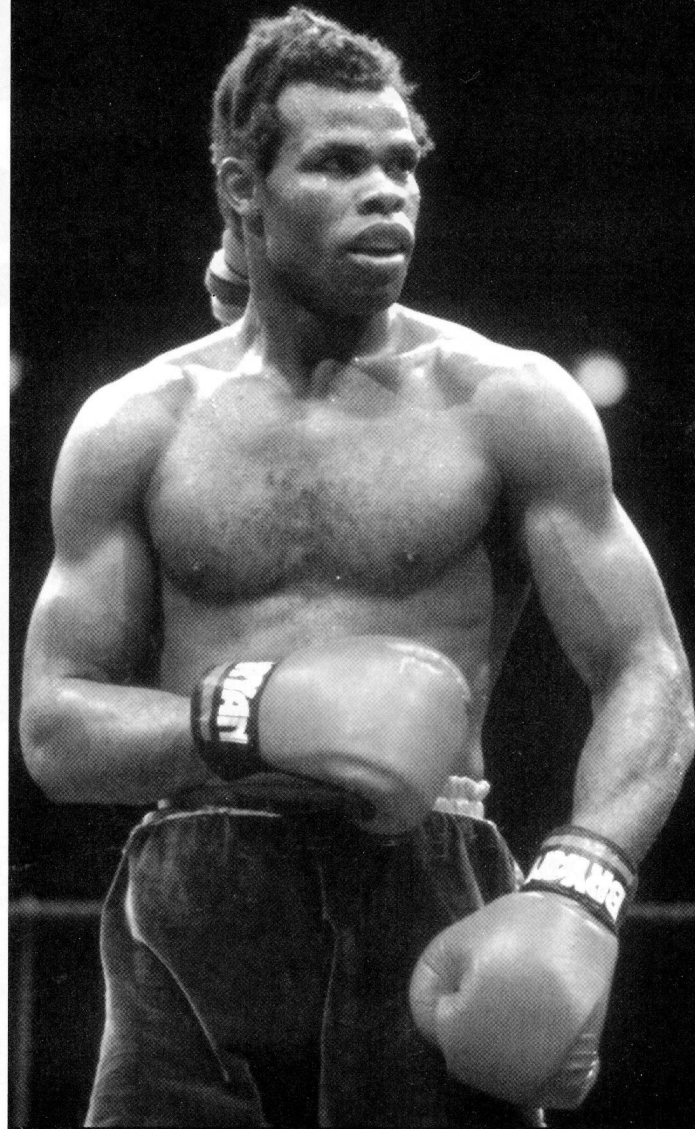
Kirkland Laing has been described as the most naturally talented fighter from these islands never to fight for a world title, and those too young to remember him need only know that he once handed out a humiliating, away-from-home points defeat to the great Roberto Duran — a Duran with still enough juice in the tank to later win two further world titles — to understand that accolade is no mere exercise in nostalgic hyperbole.

Watching Laing was always heart-stopping stuff. Would he be at his brilliant best, standing, hands on his thighs, well within an opponent's range, shuffling his feet and feinting with his shoulders before unleashing a

combination of such devastating speed and unconventionality that one sometimes doubted the evidence of one's own eyes? Or would he be lackadaisical Laing, his attention drifting far from the ring, allowing some unheralded opponent to leave him stretched on the canvas, a look of often comical surprise etched on his face? Kirkland Laing may not have reached the heights his talents deserved — the flipside of his genius being an almost total lack of self-discipline — but precisely because of that, his life story always seemed to contain more potential from a writer's point of view than a straightforward tale of success.

Nonetheless, if anyone had told me that one day I would be reading a 400-page account of the life and times of Kirkland Laing, I would have briefly scanned the sky for flying pigs, muttered something about hell freezing over and then recommended an immediate visit to the nearest loony doctor. The best I might have expected would be for *The Gifted One* to make an appearance in one of Melanie Lloyd's excellent *Sweet Fighting Man* books, but as her profiles are based on interviews and as Laing is, one sadly deduces, in no position to participate in such an undertaking, even that seemed highly unlikely.

All of which brings me back to Mr Jarratt, a solicitor and member of the Midlands Area Council of the BBFC, who has spent the best part of seven years researching and writing *The Gifted One*. To say that he has succeeded in his self-appointed



LAING: It would be no exaggeration to term him a genius, albeit a flawed one

task would be a gross understatement. Meticulously researched, his efforts deserve the highest praise and it is no exaggeration to say that he has produced one of the best accounts of a British fighter ever written. Although technically an amateur author, Mr Jarratt also displays the literary equivalent of what he terms "Laing's supple, relaxed boxing", demonstrating a deftness of touch that would put many so-called professional scribblers to shame (I particularly liked his description of Laing as "the Sphinx of British boxing, the great enigma that no English professional had yet solved"). At times, perhaps, he can be a bit too meticulous: I'm not sure I really needed the best part of two pages on the post-Laing-fight career of one Marvin McDowell, but let's not quibble. The absence of any recent or contemporary quotes from Laing is noticeable,

though entirely understandable under the circumstances, but his sunny, good-natured disposition still shines through in the recollections of those who knew him.

And that's not all. Not content with publishing the book at his own expense (and it in no way suffers in comparison with "proper" books), Mr Jarratt is also donating a percentage of each sale to Kirkland Laing, until such time as Jarratt has recovered the initial costs, after which point the whole sale price of every book sold will be go directly to Laing.

Copies can be obtained online via [www.oliverjarratt.com](http://www.oliverjarratt.com) (£18.00 plus £5.20 postage), by cheque, etc., from P.O. Box 14985, Solihull, West Midlands B93 3EU, while related queries may be addressed to [kirklandlaingbook@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:kirklandlaingbook@hotmail.co.uk). Highly recommended.