

Kelly: A Father, a Son, an American Quest

Daniel J. Boyne. Mystic Seaport, \$34.95 (256p) ISBN 9780939511235

In a time when rowing rivaled boxing and baseball in popularity, Jack Kelly (1889-1960) was its greatest champion. In this attractive illustrated biography, sports and society writer Boyne (*The Red Rose Crew: A True Story of Women, Winning and the Water*) chronicles Kelly's rise from modest beginnings as the son of Irish immigrants to Olympic gold, a journey that left him both triumphant and bitter. Boyne makes a compelling argument that Kelly's rowing acumen was directly related to his other major physical pursuit, bricklaying, which he took up at age eighteen: "a perfect exercise for strengthening your hands, wrists and forearms." That and years of training on Philadelphia's Schuylkill River made Kelly the fastest rower in the world, but prejudice barred him from England's prestigious Henley Regatta. That sleight, never forgotten, led him to push his son Kell into the sport, and ultimately to win the Regatta in 1947. An obvious labor of love, the book is so fond of its subject that it reads at times like a tall tale—Kelly even saves a woman from a burning building—but even so, it's a fine portrait of two Olympic champions and their remarkable family, including Jack's daughter Grace, and theater stars Walter and George. (Mar.)