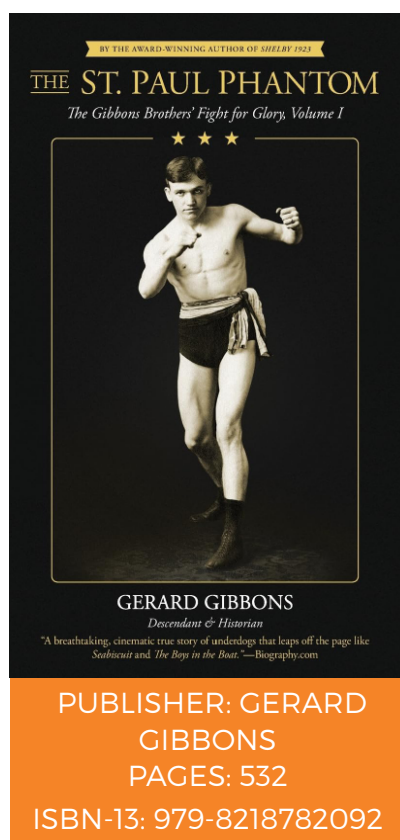


The St. Paul Phantom.

BY GERARD GIBBONS



In the spring of 1910, twenty-three-year-old Mike Gibbons and his nineteen-year-old brother Tommy stand sparring in a clearing outside St. Paul, Minnesota, while Halley's Comet drags its blue tail across the sky overhead. They are sons of County Mayo by way of Frogtown—Irish-Catholic boys who have grown up ducking the beatings of a particular English bully named Catherwood, riding the back bumper of the Selby Avenue streetcar to escape him. They have made vows, of the kind boys make when comets pass. Tonight, Mike makes a new one. "You and me, Tommy," he says, painting dreams in the starlight. "The first brothers in history to be crowned champions of the world." That promise opens *The St. Paul Phantom*, the first volume of Gerard Gibbons's family-history trilogy and a sweeping recovery project—equal parts biography, sports epic, and immigrant-American chronicle—devoted to two of the early twentieth century's most extraordinary fighters.

The book has unusual provenance and unusual force. Gerard Gibbons is Tommy's grandson; for decades after his father's death, he kept "sealed cardboard boxes and a large locked trunk" of family papers, photographs, diaries, and love letters in storage—moving them from house to house, unsure of what to do

with them. In 2016, he finally opened the vault. *The St. Paul Phantom* is the result of years of archival immersion: galleries, libraries, museums, and memorabilia collections worldwide, pieced together with primary newspaper accounts and the brothers' own writing. The seams do not show.

This is the ambition, and the gift, of the book: the Gibbons brothers' story is also the country's. Across more than five hundred pages and three Parts spanning 1850 to 1920, Gibbons walks his readers from the howling desperation of post-Famine Ireland to the rise of the great American cities; through race riots, presidential assassinations, suffragette marches, the world's first global pandemic, and a world war in which both brothers enlisted among Minnesota's first volunteers. The book sits comfortably on the shelf with *Seabiscuit* and *The Boys in the Boat*, and the comparison is not hyperbole—Gibbons writes with the same braided ambition: a single American story told with such care for its world that the world becomes the story.

The St. Paul Phantom is a generous, radiant work of American history—written with a descendant's love and a journalist's discipline, alive with men and women you will want to know, and wise about the kind of victory that does not come with a crown. It is the rare family story that is also a national one, and the rare boxing book that has nothing to do with violence and everything to do with grace. Read it for the fights. Stay for the humans. Pass it on. 