

John ('Jackie') Dunn – Professional Ice Skater of Effingham

JEREMY PALMER

John 'Jackie' Edward Powell Dunn is one of the great celebrity 'what might have beens' for Effingham. We owe a debt to the journalist Eileen Ascroft for writing about him and allowing us to bring this most forgotten of idols back to life.

Forgotten idol

Eileen Ascroft wrote about John Dunn in her *Daily Mirror* column published on 18 July 1938. She described her childhood friendship with him and her admiration of his short career as a 1930s British figure skater whose best finish had won him a silver medal at the 1935 World Figure Skating Championships. The upper half of her article is shown in Figure 1 and its entire text is transcribed in Appendix I.

I picked up a newspaper and read that a brilliant young man had died.

His name was Jack Dunn.

And my thoughts flew back through the years to a charming schoolboy who lived near me in the country.

EILEEN ASCROFT'S

SANCTUARY

about his resemblance to the famous screen lover.

I read about his Hollywood contract with excitement and remembered a boy who had the swift charm of making friends.

And then I heard of his new film contract and his first big chance in the part of Rudolph Valentino in a film about the "World's greatest lover," and was proud to have known him.

But I still remembered him as the boy who could make better lemonade than mine.

And then yesterday I read of his death just at the moment when fame and fortune had come to him.

And all I could think of then was an old dance step we had once worked out together, and those long patient evenings he used to teach me how to putt.

He was only twenty-one. It seems so young to die, especially when there is so much to live for.

BOYHOOD..

A charming schoolboy with whom I once played.

"Why," I kept asking myself yesterday, "does someone like that have to die? Someone kind and charming and talented, with all the gifts of the gods at his feet."

But I think, perhaps, that is the very reason why. Someone like that has not as much to learn as we have.

They pass on quicker because their lesson is already learned here, and we who are slower in our studies have to stay behind.

"Those whom the gods love die young."

Sunday, June 17.

"THOSE whom the gods love die young."

I know what that means now.

Last night I bought an evening paper and saw this headline: "JACK DUNN DIES ON EVE OF BIG CHANCE."

I read the story of his death in horrified silence, and when my eyes came to the picture at the bottom of the page I knew it was true.

The public have lost a budding film star, a second Valentino, but I have lost an old friend.

Instinctively my feet started to trace out an old dance step—one of the most complicated we ever worked out together—for it is for his dancing that I remember Jackie best.

Many were the evenings we used to roll back the carpets in his house or mine and dance to the portable gramophone or the wireless.

We were both crazy about dancing in those days, and never since then have I met such a perfect dancer.

Years ago in a little country village Jackie's mother had a charming house near my mother's cottage on Effingham Common.

SUCCESS..

He became a really wonderful skater.

Figure 1 Part of Ascroft's article in *The Daily Mirror*, 18 July 1938.

We know where Eileen Ascroft lived but establishing where John Dunn had his childhood was much more difficult. All Eileen told us was:

'The public have lost a budding film star, a second Valentino, but I have lost an old friend ... Years ago in a little country village Jackie's mother had a charming house near my mother's cottage on Effingham Common. He was a schoolboy, then on the threshold of life, and we were making up our minds what we were going to do in the world.'

Family background

John's mother was Marguerita Isabel Alice Seitz, born in Dresden in the early 1890s. At the time of the 1901 Census Marguerita was living with her widowed mother Isabella and the latter's parents at 55, Clarendon Road, Portsmouth. In 1916 she married Edward Oliver Dunn. Her surname in the register is given as 'Seitz or Stuart-King'. She may have changed it from the one to the other by deed poll owing to anti-German sentiment in the nation at that time. Their first child was registered as simply 'male Dunn' [GRO Ref: Tonbridge 2a 1281, 1917 (Q2)]. This was actually the John ('Jack') Edward Powell Dunn whom we are interested in. According to his flying certificate he was born on 28 March 1917 in Tunbridge Wells. All three of Marguerita's children were registered with her maiden name given as Stuart-King, not as Seitz.

From an article published in the *West Middlesex Gazette* on 7 August 1926 we know that Edward was petitioning for the dissolution of his marriage, on the grounds that since 1923 Marguerita had been absent and that from November 1925 she had proved to be committing adultery. A *decree nisi* was granted. The three children, including John, were now being looked after by an aunt.

DIVORCE SUIT.

**WIFE GOES ON HOLIDAY NEVER
TO RETURN.**

In the Divorce Court, last week, before Mr. Justice Swift, Mr. Edward Oliver Dunn, mechanical engineer, of Madeley-road, Ealing, petitioned for the dissolution of his marriage with his wife Margarita, because of her adultery with a co-respondent named Pugh.

Petitioner, in reply to Mr. T. J. O'Connor, said that he was married in April, 1916, at Wadhurst, Sussex, and afterwards lived at various addresses and finally at The Tile House, Westcott, Dorking. There had been three children, who were at present with his wife's aunt, and he was content that they should remain there.

Mr. W. O. Willis (who appeared for the respondent) said that the children were being carefully looked after, and it was thought best to let them remain there for some time.

Petitioner, continuing, said that the married life was at first happy, but while living at Dorking various matters of unhappiness arose, and they culminated in his wife leaving him. She went away, in the spring of 1923, saying she was going for a holiday, and she never came back. He wrote to her on several occasions between then and 1925, suggesting she should return. In November, 1925, she wrote to him as follows:—

I have decided to live with John Pugh as we love each other, and I am staying at this hotel with him. Our marriage was never a success. It was a mistake, and I refuse to continue it.

Until he received that letter, said petitioner, he did not know that his wife had committed adultery. He caused inquiries to be made at the Cavendish Hotel, Eastbourne, and they were unsuccessful. Further inquiries resulted in his petition alleging adultery at the Charing Cross Hotel.

After evidence from the hotel his lordship granted petitioner a decree nisi. The question of custody was left to be dealt with by summons in chambers.

Figure 2 Edward Dunn's divorce hearing, *West Middlesex Gazette*, 7 August 1926.

Marguerita had meanwhile bought Walnut Tree Cottage in Effingham from Anthony Nicholas Diamantidi on 7 October 1932 [Title register for Grove House, Leatherhead, Guildford Road, Effingham (Freehold) Title Number: SY126595]. Not long afterwards she sold it, on 26 April 1933, this information originating in a handwritten list of the owners of this cottage. It gives us one firm link between John Dunn and Eileen Ascroft in Effingham, although Eileen's article seemed to describe a longer childhood friendship between them. The Electoral Registers do not indicate whether the family had a previous property in or near the village. However, John Dunn is mentioned as playing for Effingham Manor Golf Club in a round against A W Clemensha in *The Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, 4 June 1932, which suggests he already had an association with the village before the family bought Walnut Tree Cottage in October.

Early skating achievements

The earliest mention of John Dunn in the newspapers appears to be in this short announcement seen in Figure 3, published in *The Daily Mirror* on 19 January 1934.

He was evidently destined for greater things. The following summary of his figure skating career is taken from the 'Skate Guard' blog article 'WhoDUNNit: The Mysterious Death Of Jackie Dunn':

He made his first appearance at the European Championships in 1934, finishing sixth and returned the following year to finish just off the podium in fourth. His greatest success came at the 1935 World Figure Skating Championships in Budapest, Hungary, where he was able to outrank his rival Sharp and win the silver medal behind Olympic Gold Medallist Karl Schäfer. Jackie finished sixth at the 1936 Olympics in Germany and despite a second place finish in the free skate at the 1936 World Championships in Paris, was unable to move up from a fifth place finish in the school figures and finished just off the podium in fourth.

(<https://skateguard1.blogspot.com/2015/02/whodunnit-mysterious-death-of-jack-dunn.html>)



Figure 3 Dunn in the European figure skating championship, Innsbruck, 1934.

On 23 September 1935 he also gained his flying certificate, his home address then being 17, Shepherd House in Mayfair.

Professional career

As a result of his brief figure skating career so far, Dunn met and became a lover of Sonja Henie, a Norwegian skating champion of major stature as well as a film star. The photograph of them in Figure 5 (for which the official caption misspells her name) was published in *The Tatler* on 9 October 1935.

Following Henie's victory at the 1936 Winter Olympics, he turned professional and then followed her to the United States. He became Henie's lover and professional skating partner in her touring ice show for the next two years. Their relationship ended when Henie became involved with Tyrone Power.

Dunn's athletic build and handsome good looks had opened doors for him in Hollywood. He passed screen tests for several movie production companies but was forced to wait for the right film and part to become available.

Unexpected death

While on a rabbit hunting trip in Texas in June 1938 Dunn contracted a rare disease, tularemia, through a cut in his hand. He was admitted to hospital but was initially misdiagnosed. Once his true condition became known, doctors searched frantically for the two men in Los Angeles known to have survived tularemia. Both gave Jack a transfusion but it was too late. His mother Marguerita arrived in New York on 15 July. American newspapers told of her then catching a flight across the continent in a race against death, to be by the side of her son dying in a Tucson hospital. She was too late though; Dunn died on the 16th, aged 21, ten hours before she arrived at the hospital.



Figure 4 "To Helen Sincerely John Dunn 22:iii:37".
A fine photograph of him signed in 1937.



Figure 5 Dunn with Sonja Henje.

From the *Moravia Daily News-Post*, 18 July 1938:

'Death Wins Race'

'Mrs. Marguerita Pughe, mother of Jack Dunn, British ice skating champion who was about to get his big break in the movies, ... stepped from an airlines plane at Los Angeles only to learn she had lost a race with death that started in England. Dunn had already died of Tularemia, a rare disease.'

He died on the day that he had been scheduled to start shooting his first picture 'The Duke of West Point'. He had also been due, following that, to have played Rudolph Valentino, to whom he bore a remarkable resemblance, in a biography of the late movie idol's life. A fuller account of his death was published in *The Liverpool Echo* on the day he died and can be read in Appendix II.

A Requiem Mass was held for him at the Church of the Good Shepherd in Beverley Hills and he was buried in Calvary Cemetery in Los Angeles. A simultaneous service was held in England attended by his two sisters, Betty and Barbara, and his father Edward.



Figure 6 Marguerita Pughe.

Aftermath

Dunn's mother Marguerita subsequently returned to America. The photograph in Figure 7 shows her (at centre) in New York in 1939 among the witnesses to a mail-fraud trial. As the caption notes, she had lost a substantial amount of money in a bond deal.



AMONG WITNESSES AT BUCKNER MAIL-FRAUD TRIAL: Herbert Marshall, British screen star, with his secretary, Miss Helen Dawson (right) and Mrs. Marguerita Pughe of London, who said she lost \$4,000 in the Philippine bond deal, waiting to tell the court in New York of the alleged offers made by associates of William P. Buckner Jr.

Figure 7 Marguerita Pughe in New York, 1939.

Marguerita married Aldon Sloan Byers in Las Vegas on February 14th 1940.

She was granted American citizenship on July 16th 1946, eight years to the day since her son's death. One of the two witnesses was Maria M Romero, possibly the mother of the legendary American comedian Cesar Romero; the other was Lorayne Mowbray, wife of the English actor Alan Mowbray. It seems that Marguerita was maintaining the Hollywood connections initiated by her son.

She died on 26 August 1982 in Los Angeles, still bearing the Byers surname.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures 1, 3: by kind permission of Reach plc / *Mirrorpix*

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Figure 4: ELHG Archive, purchased via eBay

Figure 5: under Licence from the Mary Evans Picture Library

Figure 6: by kind permission of *Newspapers.com*

Figure 7: from *The Spokesman Review*, 26 June 1939

APPENDIX I

Transcript of Ascroft's article in The Daily Mirror, 18 July 1938

I picked up a newspaper and read that a brilliant young man had died. His name was Jack Dunn. And my thoughts flew back through the years to a charming schoolboy who lived near me in the country.

"Those whom the gods love die young." I know what that means now. Last night I bought an evening paper and saw this headline: "JACK DUNN DIES ON EVE OF BIG CHANCE."

I read the story of his death in horrified silence, and when my eyes came to the picture at the bottom of the page I knew it was true.

The public have lost a budding film star, a second Valentino, but I have lost an old friend.

Instinctively my feet started to trace out an old dance step – one of the most complicated we ever worked out together – for it is for his dancing that I remember Jackie best.

Many were the evenings we used to roll back the carpets in his house or mine and dance to the portable gramophone or the wireless.

We were both crazy about dancing in those days, and never since then have I met such a perfect dancer.

* * *

Years ago in a little country village Jackie's mother had a charming house near my mother's cottage on Effingham Common.

He was a schoolboy then on the threshold of life, and we were making up our minds what we were going to do in the world.

Even in those days Jackie possessed the magic key to success. Everything he tried to do he did well; everyone he met liked him on sight, everything he did turned out right. Even as a schoolboy he was nice-looking. I used to call him Rudy because he looked so much like a younger edition of Rudolph Valentino. This used to make him furious and then he would pull my hair and we would fight.

* * *

I wanted to be a writer in those days and write great books. Jackie's ambitions used to waver between a professional skating instructor and a golfing pro.

People used to laugh when he told them. They knew he'd go even further than that. Because he was one of those rare people favoured by the gods. The mark of success was on his brow even at that early age.

Good looks, health, talent, not only for one thing, but for many, friends, ambition, charm – he had all these things to take him far in life.

He held the passport to fame and the ticket to fortune in his hands when he was only a schoolboy.

* * *

After he went away I used to hear scraps of news of him from time to time. I heard that in the world skating championships at Budapest he came second to Karl Schaeffer, the Austrian. He was eighteen then.

I was thrilled with the news, but I still thought of him as the boy who was a better shot with an air-gun than I was. I heard that he had turned a professional skater and gone to America, where he was partnering Sonja Henie, queen of the ice.

I was impressed but I still thought of him as the boy who couldn't stand on his head. I heard rumours of a romance with Sonja Henie, And I remembered him as the boy who used to pull my hair when I teased him about his resemblance to the famous screen lover.

I read about his Hollywood contract with excitement and remembered a boy who had the swift charm of making friends.

And then I heard of his new film contract and his first big chance in the part of Rudolph Valentino in a film about the "World's greatest lover," and was proud to have known him. But I still remembered him as the boy who could make better lemonade than mine.

And then yesterday I read of his death just at the moment when fame and fortune had come to him. And all I could think about was an old dance step we had once worked out together, and those long patient evenings he used to teach me how to putt.

"Why," I kept asking myself yesterday, "does someone like that have to die? Someone kind and charming and talented, with all the gifts of the gods at his feet."

* * *

But I think, perhaps, that is the very reason why. Someone like that has not as much to learn as we have. They pass on quicker because their lesson is already learned here, and we who are slower in our studies have to stay behind. "Those whom the gods love die young."

APPENDIX II

Dunn's death reported in The Liverpool Echo, 16 July 1938

SONJA HENIE'S PARTNER

**Contracted Rare
Disease**

BATTLE FOR LIFE

**Had Been Cast To Play
Role Of Valentino**

HOLLYWOOD, Saturday.
One of Hollywood's youngest and most promising film stars has died from a mysterious illness.

Jack Dunn, 21-years-old film star and Olympic skater, and one-time partner of Sonja Henie, died to-day in a Hollywood hospital. His full name was John Edward Powell Dunn.

Early to-day Mr. Dunn had suffered a relapse after showing signs of improve-



Mr. John Dunn

ment. Then a bulletin issued by his doctors stated that his condition was "only fair and still critical."

When he was taken to hospital a week ago it was stated that he was suffering from a streptococcal infection affecting the eyes, nose and throat, but death was stated to be due to a rare disease diagnosed as tularemia, caused by contact with rabbits.

Continued on next page ...

FIGHT FOR LIFE

A last-minute effort was made to save Mr. Dunn by means of a blood transfusion from a man who had recovered from the same disease, but Dunn, who had previously had three transfusions, continued to sink.

Mr. Dunn, who has two sisters in England, was born near Wells, Somerset, and educated at Stowe and Trinity College, Cambridge. He was a member of the British Olympic skating team in 1936, and also partner of Miss Sonja Henie, former Olympic and world champion. He turned professional the same year.

Mr. Dunn never won any outstanding championships, but he was a brilliant free-skater. It was probably his ability to give a spectacular display in this type of skating that prompted him to accept offers to turn professional and join the same group as Sonja Henie.

He was signed on for a year by Universal Pictures. They paid him £6,500 for that period without featuring him in a film, explaining that no suitable story could be found.

Over six feet tall, and bearing a remarkable likeness to the late Rudolph Valentino, Mr. Dunn was selected to take the part of Valentino in the United Artists' film of the latter's life, but was taken ill before work could begin.

It was generally thought in Hollywood that Mr. Dunn and Miss Sonja Henie would have been co-starred in ice spectacle pictures, and that they would become the "Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers of the Ice." At one time there was talk of a romance between Miss Henie and Mr. Dunn.—Reuter.

According to *Black's Medical Dictionary*, Tularemia is a disease of rodents, such as rabbits and rats. Infection can be spread into the hands of persons engaged in skinning rabbits.
