

Your Communities

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'Irishmen' celebrates boxing glory, oddities

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To some, it's the most unusual (and macabre) piece of sports memorabilia around. To others, it's a beacon for all underdogs. But to 19th-century Irish boxing legend Dan Donnelly, the mummified body part now on display at Boston College was just his right arm.

Arts

Set in a glass case, Donnelly's limb is part of "Fighting Irishmen: Celebrating Celtic Prizefighters 1820 to Present," at BC's Burns Library until September. But this odd relic, and how it wound up in a rare books library, aren't the only bits of history making this show fascinating.

Wander among the display cases and you don't have to be a boxing fan or Irish to become engrossed in the larger human story the exhibition tells. At its core, "Fighting Irishmen" is about heroes and hope and pulling yourself up by your own boxing bootstraps.

"Boxing was a way out of the ghetto, first for the Irish, then for African-Americans, then for Hispanics and also for the Jews. It was a way for people to improve their lot," said the Burns Library's director, Robert O'Neill. "People took great pride in the success of these boxers."

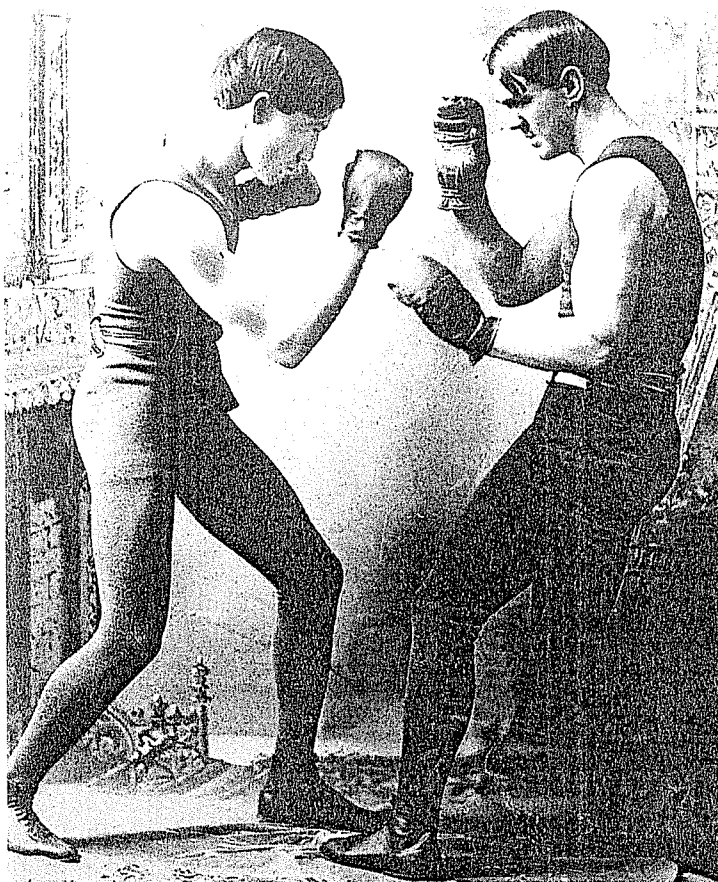
The display's exhibits, however, make clear boxing was no easy path to a better life. One explains that 1850s heavyweight champ John "Old Smoke" Morrissey earned his nickname in a brutal fight held in the back room of a bar.

"After tipping over the pot-belly stove, Morrissey's opponent held him down in the hot coals until his back began to smoke. Then Morrissey got up and won," reads the wall text.

In those days, biting and worse were allowed. The exhibition, at the library in collaboration with the Irish Arts Center of New York and BC's Center for Irish Programs, notes that one of Morrissey's famous fights, where he bit through boxer Bill Poole's cheek, was depicted in Martin Scorsese's 2002 movie "Gangs of New York." And for some, the physical indignities continued even after death.

"Dan Donnelly defeated the English champion in 1815 at a time when Ireland was still very much under the yoke of England," said O'Neill.

"So he became a national hero in Ireland. . . . When he died, 70,000 people attended his funeral. But this was also a time when graves were being



A poster for an 1897 bout in Brooklyn is among the artifacts on display in the "Fighting Irishmen" exhibition at Boston College's Burns Library.

robbed and corpses sold to physicians."

Donnelly's body was no exception. When it was discovered missing after his death in 1820, a massive search turned it up at the office of a doctor who agreed to relinquish most of the body. He kept the right arm. Mummified, the arm later surfaced at a Scottish medical school, then in a traveling circus, and eventually spent 50 years on display at the Hideout Pub in County Kildare.

Exhibition curator James J. Houlihan, a New York businessman and sports memorabilia collector, spent a full year tracking down artifacts. But Donnelly's arm required the most finagling.

"We had to get the permission of the Irish government to remove it from the country," he said. "Then we had to figure out how it would safely get here."

In the end, the chief pilot for Irish airline Aer Lingus flew Donnelly's arm

here, stowing it in the cockpit.

Stories and stuff of nearly two centuries more of boxing heroes are captured in 19th-century woodcuts, paintings, and poems, as well as grainy old photographs and modern high-speed snapshots that capture every bead of flying sweat. Memorabilia ranges from Victorian boxing cards (similar to baseball cards), antique boxing magazines, and gloves and robes of champions.

From Jack Dempsey's blazer to James "Cinderella Man" Braddock's birth certificate to ticket stubs from forgotten bouts (\$1 for Jack Levert vs. Jas. Gorman in 1893 at the Olympic Club), past battles and glories are made palpable here. Houlihan has peppered the show with anecdotes, trivia, and oddities.

Three paintings of boxing matches, for example, turn out to be the artwork of Mahonri Young, a grandson of Mor-

mon Church leader Brigham Young. A simple black-and-white photograph is revealed to be a rare image of John "The Boston Strongboy" Sullivan defending his heavyweight crown in 1889 in an illegal bout in a field in Mississippi. It was the last bare-knuckle title.

"A lot of times museum exhibits are too somber. But the Irish tradition is one of storytelling and what I found was that there were a lot of great stories within the story . . . and a lot were humorous. So we wanted to give people a chance to enjoy them," Houlihan said.

O'Neill expanded the show with materials on local fighters, Irish or not, including three-time New England Golden Gloves winner "Irish" Micky Ward of Lowell, world champ Rocky Marciano of Brockton, and onetime professional boxer A. Joseph DeNucci of Newton, state auditor since 1987.

"Young people don't realize what a significant role boxing played in the sports scene up until the 1960s," O'Neill said. "But I grew up in the era when Friday night boxing was standard family entertainment. . . . You heard about boxers like Rocky Marciano all the time. He was a local boy and the only heavyweight champion that retired undefeated. Everybody in Massachusetts took great pride in him."

"Fighting Irishmen: Celebrating Celtic Prizefighters 1820 to Present" is open through Sept. 5 at BC's Burns Library, 140 Commonwealth Ave. Free. 617-552-3282, bc.edu/burns.