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Pick this fight at Boston College

By Chris Bergeron/DAILY NEWS STAFF

CHESTNUT HILL — Long before Notre Dame's Fighting Irish won gridiron glory or The Cooz electrified Boston Garden, the original Celtic warrior was a long-armed boxer named Dan Donnelly who trounced the hated English champ in a bloody bare-knuckled brawl in 1815 that made him a national hero.

Since then, Fighting Irishmen from "Boston Strong Boy" John L. Sullivan to Micky Ward of Lowell have punched their way from Palookaville to world titles in a sport that gives immigrants a fighting chance at the American Dream.

The battling sons of Ye Ould Sod are back in the ring again including honorary Irishman Mohammed Ali in a barnburner of an exhibit at Boston College.

Arriving like a haymaker in the stately Burns Library with its glorious stained glass windows, "The Fighting Irishmen: Celebrating Celtic Prizefighters, 1820 to the Present" delivers more knockouts than the Friday Night Fights.

Organized by James J. Houlihan, a New York businessman who promotes Irish culture, it explores the history, social impact and public image of boxing through a remarkable collection of memorabilia and artifacts.

"The bravery and tenacity of the Gaels, especially as heroic warriors, are renowned throughout history," he said. "The champions we celebrate (in this show) exemplify this great tradition."

A longtime boxing fan, Houlihan decided to organize the exhibit after seeing a show about the Golden Age of Jewish fighters from the 1920s.

When his exhibit about Irish boxers first opened in New York, he said, "People really connected with the stories it told about."

"Whenever any immigrant group arrived, they were treated like second-class citizens. They got stuck with the toughest, lowest-paying jobs. They had to deal with discrimination. They had to be tough and persistent," said Houlihan. "That's what made this country great. You don't have to be Irish or a boxing fan to love the good storytelling and interesting artifacts in this show."

Occupying several rooms and a hall in the library, it comprises about 200 artifacts, including historic photographs, prints, old boxing gear, programs of famous fights and images revealing Hollywood's skewered portrayal of "the sweet science."

Originally presented at the Irish Arts Center in New York, the free exhibit will be at BC through August. Visitors will see Sullivan's fur coat that resembles a bearskin, Gene Tunney's heavy bag, Jerry Quarry's robe, the Olympic jersey worn by Charlie Nash when he was representing Ireland and a movie poster autographed by Hilary Swank who earned an Oscar for "Million Dollar Baby."

No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find even a poster showing Barbra Streisand as a boxing coach in "The Main Event." Maybe she isn't Irish enough.

Viewing the exhibit is like a ringside seat to Irish pugilistic history.

Library Director Robert O'Neill said, "All the major Irish boxers from the 19th century to the present are represented in the exhibit," including "Gentleman" Jim Corbett, Billy Conn, Barry McGuigan, Mike "the Celtic

Cyclone" McTigue, Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney and Jim Braddock whose gutsy comeback inspired the movie "Cinderella Man."

The Holliston resident said the exhibit "offers visitors a unique glimpse at the role prize fighting played in the history of Irish America."

But in a library that usually honors Irish literary champions from Samuel Beckett to William Butler Yeats, this show's most remarkable artifact is Donnelly's mummified right arm.

Hacked from his body by grave robbers and dipped in red lead to preserve it, his 39-inch arm resembles a stringy hunk of beef jerky.

Displayed in a college founded by Jesuits who have always venerated sacred relics, Donnelly's leathery arm is usually displayed in the Hideout Pub in County Kildare, Ireland. Erin go bragh. It was insured for \$250,000 to make the trip to the United States for the show.

For O'Neill, the national pride generated by Donnelly's historic victory before the 1829 Emancipation of Catholics transformed his wandering limb "into a virtual relic."

"At the library, we're interested in all aspects of Irish history and culture," he said. "For many years the Irish dominated boxing."

O'Neill explained that Ali was represented in the exhibit because he shares some Irish blood from his ancestors. New York Irish Consul Tim O'Connor observed "the story of Irish-American boxing is the story of Irish America itself."

Like other newly arrived immigrants before and after them, Irish newcomers took to boxing because it provided opportunities for wealth and fame otherwise denied them. "Boxing was one of the few ways an Irish immigrant could ascend to a higher economic status," O'Neill said.

As the exhibit shows, Tunney and Billy Connolly both married socialites after earning fame in the ring though the parents of Connolly's bride disapproved.

O'Neill also observed the shared Irish passion for boxing as a man-to-man contest made it the only sport in recent years to avoid sectarian difficulties between Catholics and Protestants in troubled cities like Belfast.

The exhibit is accompanied by an illustrated catalog that includes informative essays by Houlihan; actor Liam Neeson, a former boxer whose old gloves are on display; and others.

THE ESSENTIALS:

The John J. Burns Library at Boston College is located at 140 Commonwealth Ave. in Chestnut Hill. Admission is free and open to the public Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is handicapped accessible.

For information, call 617-552-3282.