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Irish boxing legends exhibition at BC

Editors note: The following was submitted by Boston College.

The exhibition "Fighting Irishmen: Celebrating Celtic Prizefighters 1820 to Present" makes its Massachusetts debut at Boston College, presented in collaboration with the New York's Irish Arts Center. The exhibit is free and open to the public, and will be on view at BC's John J. Burns Library of Rare Books and Special Collections from now through August.

"Fighting Irishmen" is composed of an eclectic collection of boxing artifacts, including prints, photographs, paintings, robes, gloves, boxing bags, films and other items that offer "a veritable stroll down memory lane for fight fans and historians alike," exhibit organizers said.

New England boxers are prominent in the exhibit, including legendary world heavyweight champion John L. Sullivan of Roxbury, who reportedly attended Boston College for a short

time, and three-time New England Golden Gloves winner "Irish" Micky Ward of Lowell, who is the subject of a 2007 biography by WCVB-TV and ESPN sports anchor Bob Halloran and of the upcoming feature film, "The Fighter."

"The Center for Irish Programs at Boston College and the Burns Library are pleased to be able to host this extraordinary exhibit. It offers visitors a unique glimpse at the role prizefighting played in the history of Irish America, especially as seen through the Boston connection from John L. Sullivan to 'Irish' Micky Ward," said Robert O'Neill, director of BC's Burns Library.

"All the major Irish boxers from the 19th century to the present are represented in the exhibit," O'Neill added. "In addition to names like Sullivan, 'Gentleman' Jim Corbett, James 'Cinderella Man' Braddock, Gene Tunney, Jack Dempsey, Billy Conn and Gerry Cooney, the exhibit even

includes material on Mohammed Ali, who has Irish ancestry."

Among the artifacts and pictures on display are Sullivan's fur coat; a blazer specially made for Dempsey; photographs from the archives of Sports Illustrated magazine; Charlie Nash's Olympic jersey when he was fighting for Ireland; photographs of the classic Micky Ward vs. Arturo Gatti trilogy; and historic photos of heavyweight champs Sullivan and Corbett (who gained fame as the man who knocked out Sullivan in 1892), Braddock, Tunney, Dempsey, Cooney and Jerry Quarry; world featherweight champion Barry McGuigan, nicknamed "The Clones Cyclone;" light-heavyweight Billy "Pittsburgh Kid" Conn; and Bobby Cassidy, who was ranked number one in the world as a light-heavyweight in 1975, among others.

The exhibit also includes: a heavy bag from Gene Tunney's training camp; equipment from current female fighter Maureen

Shea, used for training actress Hilary Swank for the acclaimed film "Million Dollar Baby;" and fight equipment from Ireland's John Duddy. The exhibit also displays three original oil paintings from the Tunney collection by artist Mahonri Young, Brigham Young's grandson.

Among the items on display is one of the oldest and rarest pieces of sports memorabilia in existence: the mummified right arm of 19th-century Irish prizefighting legend Dan Donnelly, who is slated to be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in June as part of the "pioneer" group. Donnelly was the first Irish-born heavyweight champion; his victory over the English champ George Cooper in 1815 sparked a national celebration, O'Neill said. After Donnelly's death, his corpse reportedly was exhumed for medical study. His right arm eventually was retrieved and placed on view in a number of pubs across the country as a sym-

bol of Ireland's pride, most recently at the Hideout Pub, County Kildare, which displayed the icon for some 50 years. The pub's former owner, Josephine Byrne, has lent it to the "Fighting Irishmen" exhibit.

In addition, visitors can view video of historic fight films provided by the Boxing Hall of Champions during their tours of the exhibit.

"The bravery and tenacity of the Gaels, especially as heroic warriors, are renowned throughout history," wrote "Fighting Irishmen" curator James J. Houlihan in the exhibit catalog. "The champions we celebrate in [this exhibit] exemplify this great tradition. Their dedication, perseverance and triumph over adversity have set fine examples for those who follow in their footsteps."

"What particularly interests me is Jim [Houlihan]'s point that the story of Irish-American boxing is also the story of Irish America itself. Back in earlier decades, as

the Irish sought to find their feet here, boxing was often a quick passport to a better life for those who had a talent for it," writes New York's Irish Consul General, Tim O'Connor.

The exhibit catalog is chock-full of essays by luminaries of the boxing and sports journalism worlds, including Irish actor Liam Neeson, himself a former fighter, who serves as honorary chairman of the exhibit. "Watching two great fighters, evenly matched, is, for me, one of the great visual poems you will ever see," notes Neeson, who has selected memorabilia from his own boxing days on display in the exhibit.

Burns Library is at 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill. The exhibit is free and open to the public. Hours are Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. (except holidays) or by appointment. Venue is handicapped accessible.

For information, call 617-552-3282 or visit www.bc.edu/burns.