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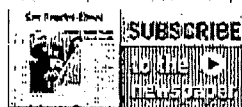
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Champ's Long Right Arm Still Packs a Wallop

The limbs of 1800s Irish boxer Dan Donnelly were legendary. The proof is displayed in N.Y.

By Thomas S. Mulligan, Times Staff Writer
September 11, 2006

NEW YORK — In his boxing prime two centuries ago, Irish champion Dan Donnelly was known for his extraordinary reach. It was said that he could fasten the bottom buttons of his knee breeches without bending over.

An anatomist might quarrel with such a claim, and indeed the evidence for extravagant boasts about sportsmen of yore tends to be frustratingly meager.

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But happily, in New York, where there's always something for refined tastes, any doubts about Dan Donnelly's reach can now be settled by eye. The mighty right arm of the only boxer ever knighted by the king of England is on display through November at the Irish Arts Center in Manhattan.

Sir Dan's mummified arm is but the most exotic attraction of an exhibition titled "Fighting Irishmen: A Celebration of the Celtic Warrior" at the Irish Arts Center, a small, old brick building a block from the Hudson River in Hell's Kitchen.

Other artifacts in the show, which was the inspiration of New York real

estate entrepreneur and boxing enthusiast James J. Houlihan, include heavyweight champ John L. Sullivan's fur-lined coat, Jack Dempsey's custom-designed blue blazer, dozens of photos of bloody-faced pugilists, and tickets to long-ago bouts involving the likes of Billy Conn, Gene Tunney and Gerry Cooney.

The honorary curator is Irish actor Liam Neeson, who recounted in an essay for the exhibition catalog that his own career as an amateur pugilist began when he was 9 and the parish priest in his hometown of Ballymena announced from the pulpit one Sunday that he was organizing a boys boxing club.

"None of us had a clue how to box," Neeson wrote, "least of all Father Darragh."

But about that arm: It's thin, mahogany-colored and, yes, alarmingly long, ending not in a fist but in a pointing index finger. It could be mistaken for a prop from the "Alien" sci-fi movie series. Irish Arts Center Executive Director Tom Scharff, who has hefted the arm, said it was surprisingly light, having lost a good portion of its sinew since Donnelly used it to knock out English champion George Cooper in a celebrated 1815 bout. George IV was

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impressed enough to grant the Irishman a knighthood.

Donnelly parlayed his fistic fame into a string of pubs around Dublin, but apparently he served himself too well, dying of drink in 1820 at age 32. His funeral procession was attended by thousands. But days later, grave robbers made off with Sir Dan's remains. Because only the cadavers of executed criminals could legally be used for medical research at the time, and supply was short, a thriving black market developed for bodies.

Police soon traced the cadaver to the home of a Dublin surgeon. His negotiating skills must have been formidable, as he not only escaped prosecution but was allowed to retain the amputated arm, which was dipped in red lead as a preservative.

Over the decades, the Donnelly arm graced a medical college in Edinburgh, a traveling circus in Ireland and, finally, a pub in Kilcullen, County Kildare, known as the Hideout, where it had hung on a wall for years. Houlihan, aware of the arm's distinguished provenance, negotiated with the owner to borrow it for the exhibition.

Brooklynite Rollo Romig, a descendant of Sir Dan, said in an interview Sunday that he was gratified to have the arm on view in a convenient place so that the story of his ancestor and his much-traveled arm could be verified.

"It's something everyone in the family has dragged out and embellished at cocktail parties for years," he said, "but nobody ever believes us."

On an obelisk erected at the site of Donnelly's triumph over Cooper is a poem containing this couplet, alluding to Sir Dan's having downed a few mugs of punch on the night of his death:

"O'erthrown by punch, unharmed by fist / He died unbeaten pugilist."

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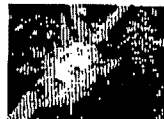
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