

# Sports Illustrated

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*Ah, cruel Death, why were you so unkind?  
To take Sir Dan and leave such trash behind*  
—Eulogy to Dan Donnelly, 1820

I AM sitting at a bar in the green heart of Ireland, holding the champion's hand. For a boxing fan who has crossed the Atlantic to be here, it is an unforgettable moment—particularly since the champ whose hand I am holding has been dead for 174 years.

It is Saturday noon in County Kildare, and the Hideout Olde World Pub is filling with local families coming from the market and a brace of habited, elderly nuns drinking, I pray, straight tea. Outside, the April sun is shining, and the village of Kilcullen, on the River Liffey, 25 miles southwest of Dublin, basks contentedly, secure in the fame and commerce that flow here, thanks to my desiccated friend.

"Let me take a picture of you," my wife, Linda, says, brandishing her little camera. Obeying her (as always), I hold up the morbid relic, which is not only the hand but the *entire petrified right arm and shoulder blade* of a 19th-century Irish sporting hero named Dan Donnelly, and manage a wan smile. The photo session done, I give Donnelly's Arm back to the publican and return to my Murphy's stout and my cod Mornay.

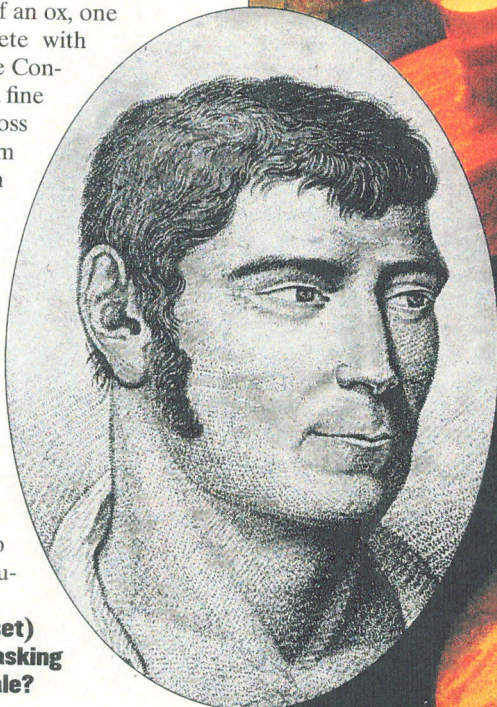
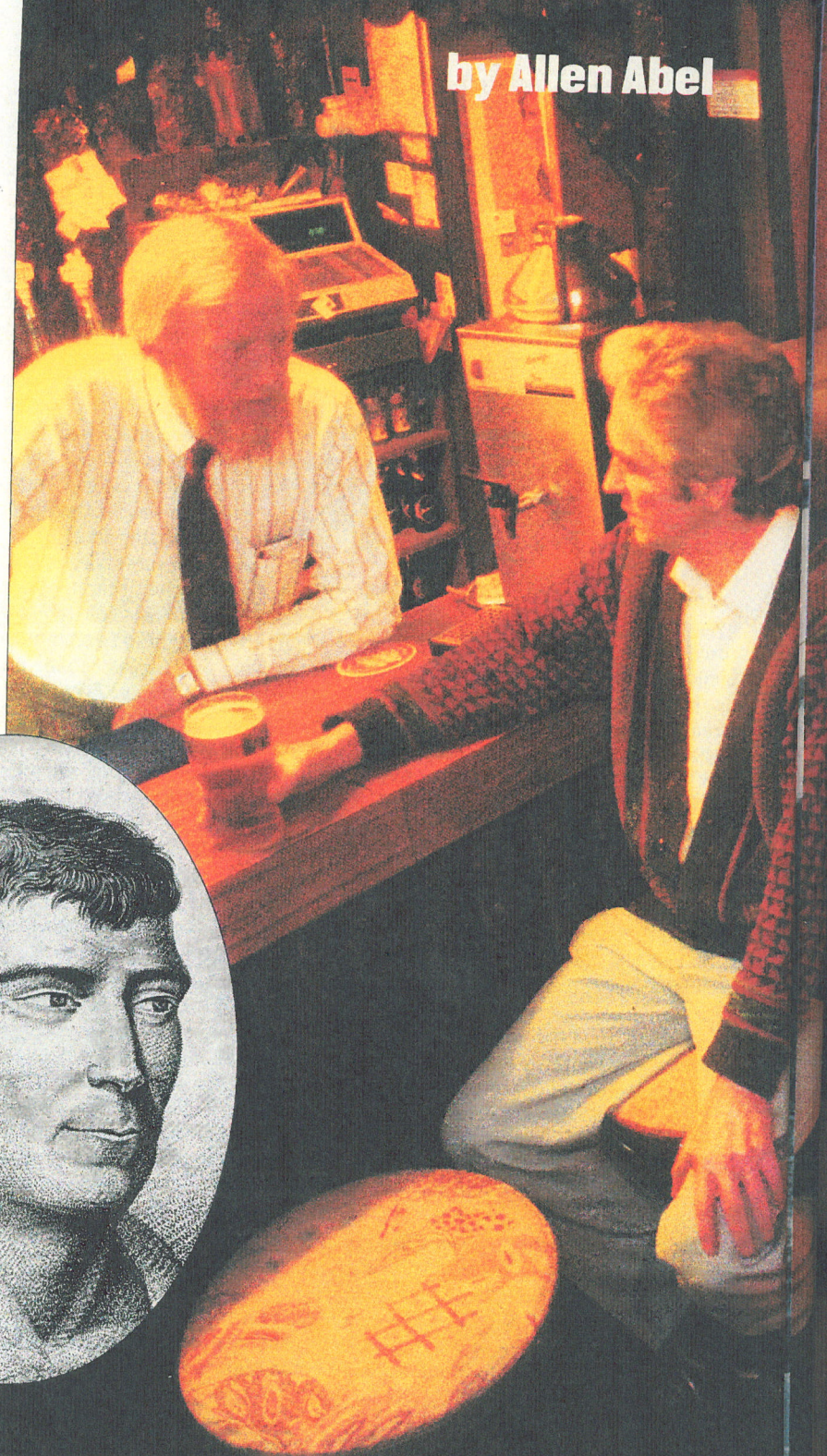
The Hideout, which has displayed the famous appendage since 1953, is a comprehensive museum of macabre Hibernian playfulness. Above my head is a knob-jawed Indian crocodile, 12 feet long with teeth like fence posts, and on adjacent shelves are the propeller of the first aeroplane to cross the Irish Sea (it crashed on Irish soil), a harp carved from the shoulder blade of an ox, one Bengal tiger skin complete with head, a quiver of bona fide Congolese poison arrows and a fine example of a Celtic cross painstakingly crafted from matchsticks and toothbrush handles. The dining tables rest on antique treadle sewing machines. But all of this pales, of course, beside the singularity of Donnelly's Arm.

Who was Dan Donnelly and why did his disciples think to save a hunk of him for Ireland to honor? Why did it take more than a century for his right arm to make its way to a display case in this exu-

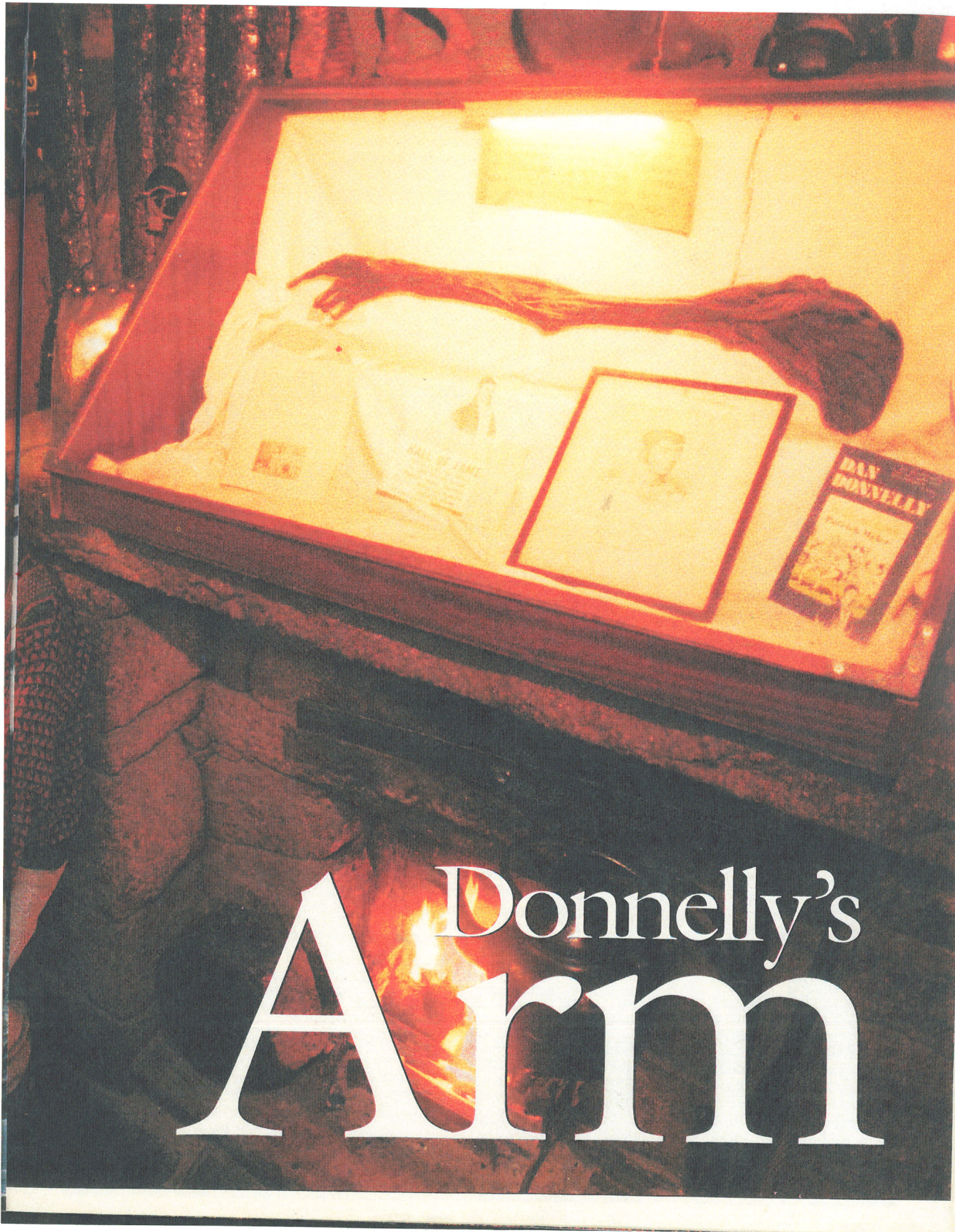
**Is the part of Donnelly (inset) preserved at the Hideout asking the bearded Byrne for an ale?**

## Revered Irish boxing champ Dan Donnelly died in 1820, but his once-feared limb endures

by Allen Abel







# Donnelly's Arm



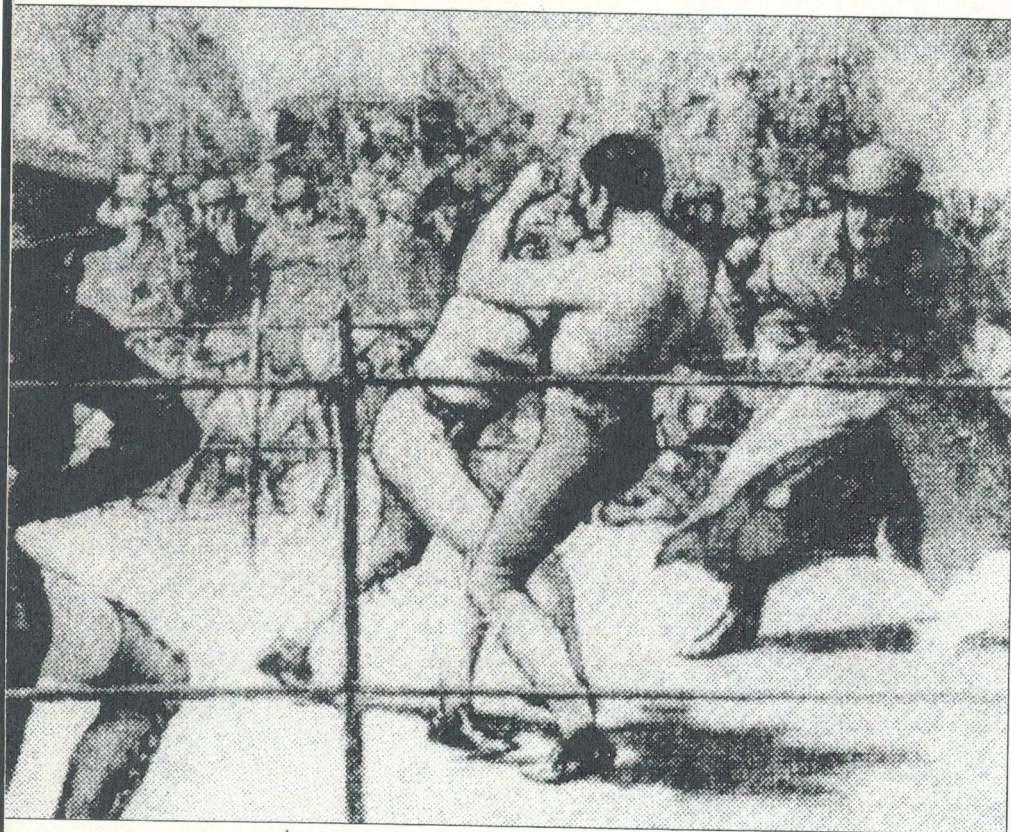
## Dan Donnelly

berant rural restaurant? The answers lie enmeshed in the proud, painful histories of Donnelly's sport and of his country. And the search for them leads a traveler to obscure corners of this old and eloquent land.

A couple of miles north of the Hideout pub, on the rolling plain of close-clipped pasture known as the Curragh, a weathered gray obelisk rests plumply inside an iron fence. Squat clumps of yellow-blooming gorse bedot the hillside beyond

noon. There was as much wrestling as punching. A round ended when a man was knocked down, or simply knelt for a rest. Matches concluded in unconsciousness, death, dispute or mass arrests. Shambling "champions" toured the countryside, taking on all comers. The entire enterprise—sparring, fighting, betting—was illegal almost everywhere. It was insanely popular.

The core of combat, then as now, was personal and national conceit. George Cooper was English, a bargeman from Staffordshire. Dan Donnelly was a son of the Dublin docks, the ninth child of his



COURTESY OF PATRICK MYLER

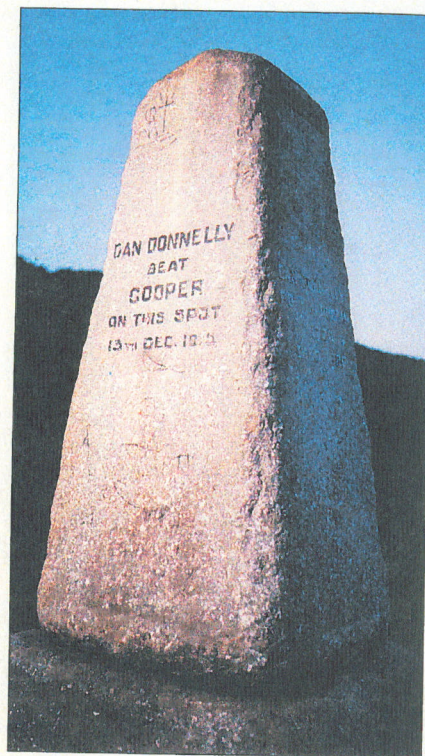
the monument, and a father kicks a soccer ball to a pair of squealing daughters clad in jumpsuits of astonishing pink. There is no one else around. The inscription on the monument says:

DAN DONNELLY  
BEAT  
COOPER  
ON THIS SPOT  
13TH DEC 1815

It was not boxing as we would recognize it. The rules, codified in 1743 in the sport's first British flowering, were rudimentary: "...no person is to seize his Adversary by the ham or the breeches. ..." A bout could last a minute, or an after-

noon. There was as much wrestling as punching. A round ended when a man was knocked down, or simply knelt for a rest. Matches concluded in unconsciousness, death, dispute or mass arrests. Shambling "champions" toured the countryside, taking on all comers. The entire enterprise—sparring, fighting, betting—was illegal almost everywhere. It was insanely popular.

In 1815, in the vague December daylight, there were 20,000 hoping, hating patriots here on the Curragh. The railroad had not been invented. They came by cart, by carriage, by towboat, by foot. Noblemen mingled with fishmongers and wheelwrights. The lust for blood leavened



**An obelisk stands where, in 1815, Donnelly buoyed Irish pride by thrashing his English foe.**

them. They called themselves the Fancy.

After hours of negotiations of stakes and side bets, the carnage began. The object was to render the opponent prostrate for half a minute or to otherwise so impair him that his managers surrendered. Donnelly, who had been discovered a couple of years earlier in the Dublin slums gallantly pummeling a neighborhood bully, had as his Don King a prominent fancier of the art named Captain Kelly. Such "seconds" stood in the arena with their fighters and dragged them to their feet when the lights went out.

It was, by surviving accounts, a hell of a fight. In one telling the Dubliner was laid flat in the second round but was revived when Kelly's beauteous daughter kissed him and whispered that she had bet her father's entire estate on his success. An Irish folk song, *The Ballad of Donnelly & Cooper*, remembers this. It may even be true. Another version of the tale holds that Miss Kelly shoved a stalk of sugarcane into the comatose Donnelly's maw, saying, "Now, me charmer, give 'im a warmer."

Revivified by whatever means, Donnelly rose before 30 seconds had passed and delivered his trademark blow, a cross-buttock hip throw that left him sitting



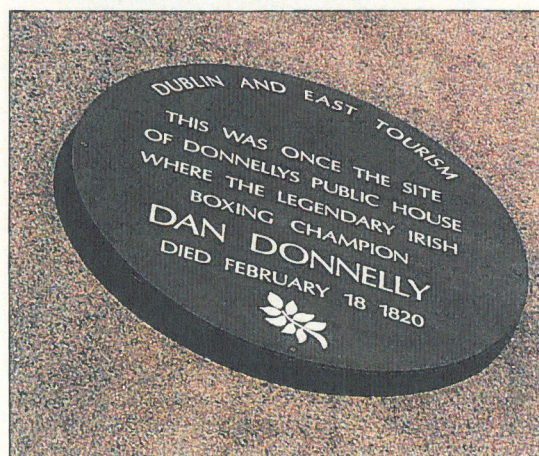


### Dan Donnelly

atop the bloodied enemy. And so it went until the 11th round, when Dan Donnelly broke George Cooper's jaw and England was defeated. It had taken 22 minutes.

The Fancy exulted, collecting wagers from backers of the bargeman at odds of 10 to 1. The Irish conqueror was lifted from the field by the throng. And now, near the close of a subsequent century, in the yielding turf of the Curragh, I walk the same path, following a double row of shallow footprints, maintained with loving exactness, that lead from the low, gray monument to the hilltop far beyond.

Flush with celebrity and his £60 purse from the Cooper fight, Dan Donnelly decided to go on tour as Champion of Ireland. Soon after, in England, the prince regent purportedly knighted him one evening at a house of pleasure; probably they both were as drunk as lords. Intoxication was Sir Dan's habitual state of being. It was said that his training regimen involved five draughts of malt for every round of sparring. It was an age when a fighter could make do with as much anesthesia as he could get.



**Donnelly drank up the profits at the Capstan before dropping dead, at 32, in another pub he operated.**

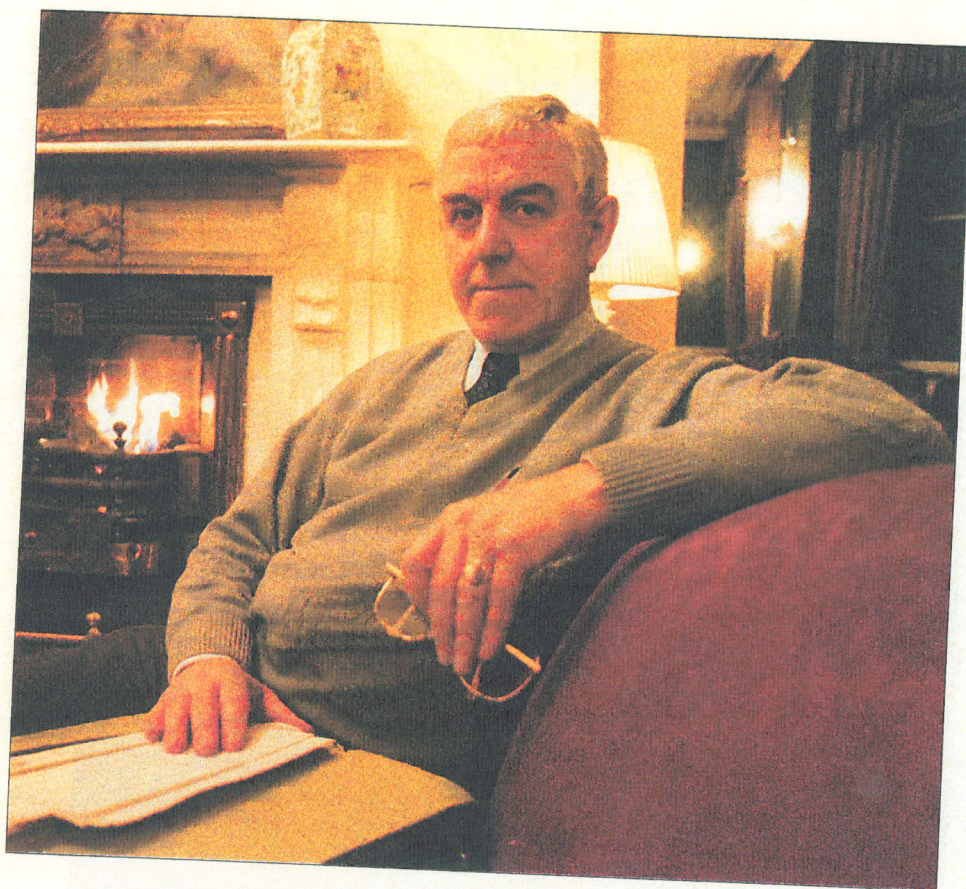
Back in Dublin the champion went into the hospitality trade, running a succession of pubs, pulling pints for the clamoring Fancy and one or two for himself. This would become the familiar path of many an ex-fighter. Jack Dempsey would do the same on Broadway. And the great Louis, his faculties nearly gone, would close his days sadly glad-handing in Las Vegas.

Some of Dan Donnelly's oases still stand. Kitty-corner from St. Patrick's Cathedral—where, like Donnelly's Arm, the skull of Jonathan Swift was kept on display for decades—in the dreary Dublin district called the Coombe, I take lunch at Fallon's Capstan Bar, where Sir Dan held sway in 1818. The fare is plebeian (vegetable soup, cheddar on toast, Guinness by the ebony pint) and I sit on a worn, tweed-covered bench in the snug by the front window, jotting notes, immersed

in Ireland. Behind me is a ceramic Dalmatian missing a foreleg, and on the bare-brick walls are old tobacco advertisements and the smoke-dulled red regalia of the Manchester United football team.

At the Capstan, Dan Donnelly went broke, as he had in Capel Street and Poolbeg. But he did not throw in the towel. He moved on to the Four Courts and another pub on Greek Street. That site is now the Dublin Motor Vehicle Office, the Oifig Cláraithe Gluaisteán, but there is a plaque commemorating the fact that just





**Dan Donnelly**

after midnight on Feb. 18, 1820, Dan Donnelly dropped dead in the Greek Street pub. He was 32. It might have been a sclerotic liver or venereal disease. But the popular opinion was that Sir Dan had drunk too much iced water immediately following a feverish game of racquets. The irony was unmistakable: It was the water, not the whiskey, that killed the Champion of Ireland. Succoring kisses and sugarcane could not avail him now.

The city wept and wailed. At the magnificent National Library in Dublin, in a reading room as still and sanctified as a synagogue, I pore through the newspapers of the day. For me it is an epiphany—the confirmation, in fading ink on a printed page, that there was such a man, in such a city, so long ago. Delighted with this ratification, I copy the account of the funeral from *Carrick's Morning Post* of Feb. 23, 1820:

*An immense number of people, some in carriages, and some on horseback, moving in slow and measured pace, formed part of the procession . . . the GLOVES were carried on a cushion in front of the hearse, from which the horses had been unyoked by the crowd, and multitudes contended for the honor of assisting in drawing it. . . .*

*. . . whatever failings he might have had,*

THE BETTMAN ARCHIVE



**Myler has helped keep everything about Donnelly—including his mug—in the public eye.**

*he never was ashamed of his country; abroad or at home he stood up in its defence, and was always ready to give a milling to those who disputed its pre-eminence. . . .*

Gazing around the gallery, half-dreaming, I wonder: A century from now, will anyone come upon my own scratchings, as I have delved into these?

The dead champion was interred on the grounds of the Royal Hospital in Kil-

mainham while the magazines filled with elegiac verse:

*Oh, Erin's daughters, come and shed  
your tears  
On your Champion's grave, who loved  
you many years  
To Erin's sons this day's a day of  
sorrow;  
Who have we now that will defend our  
Curragh?  
And:  
What dire misfortune has our land o'er  
spread,  
Our Irish Champion's numbered with  
the dead.*

The trouble was, poor Donnelly wasn't numbered with the dead for very long. It was the heyday of the professional grave robber; in Dublin they were known as "Resurrectionists" or the "Sack 'em Ups." Their trade sprang from the prohibition (until 1832) of the use of human cadavers in medical education. As executed murderers were the only exception, and since in Ireland in the 1820s professors of surgery outnumbered the recently hanged by a ratio of about six to one, it was inevitable that a commerce in contraband corpses would spring up.

It became imperative, therefore, for the tombs of the freshly departed to be guarded day and night. But the Champion of Ireland had had the bad judgment to die in the middle of winter. For a day or two a phalanx of bereaved boxing fans attended his burial place, but then, as *Carrick's* reported:

*Their naturally jovial disposition and the severity of the weather prompted them to make too frequent libations on the tomb of the departed champion and disabled them from perceiving or opposing those riflers of the House of Death.*

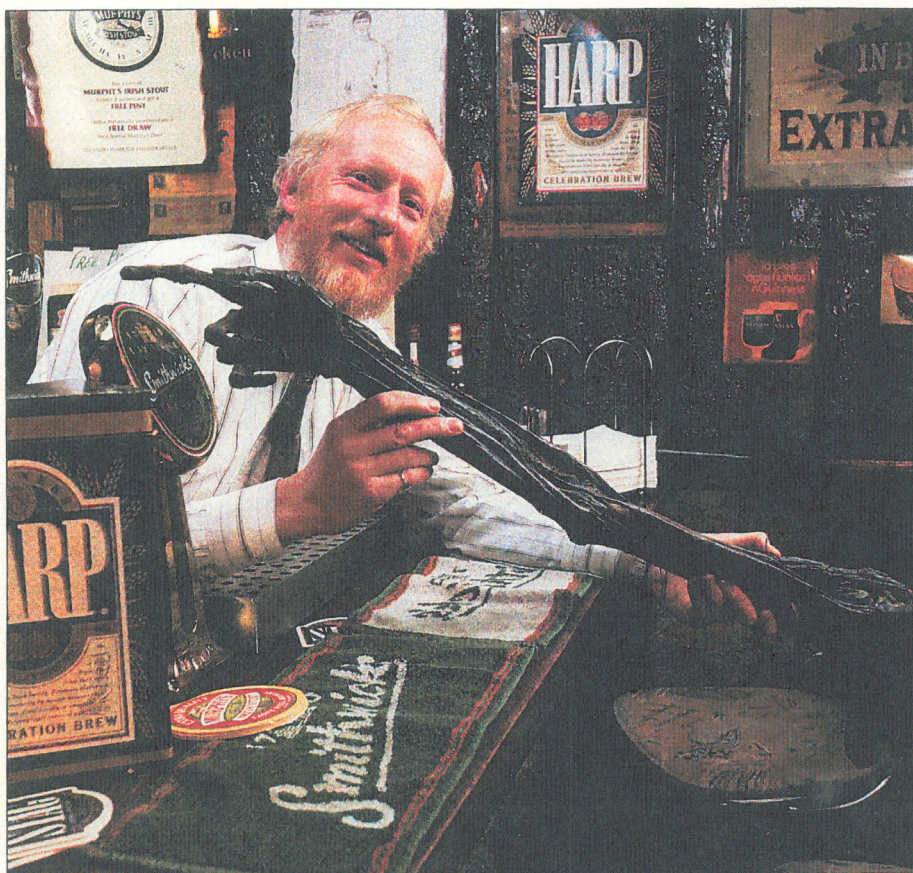
So the sepulchre was opened and the reasonably uncorrupted body taken to the laboratory of a medico named Hall. But Dr. Hall was a member of the Fancy. Instead of thanking the slaving Sack 'em Ups, he recoiled in horror when he recognized the illustrious Beetlejuice they had just dragged in.

"Take him back!" the physician prescribed. But first he went for his hacksaw and detached Dan Donnelly's strong right arm. Thus was created one of Ireland's most ghoulish souvenirs.

All this was public knowledge 174 years ago. In a letter to *Carrick's* two days after the funeral procession, a man named Burrows delineated the whole affair and added:

*I am conscious it will raise the tender*





### Dan Donnelly

*feelings of the Fancy, to know that that arm, the object of their highest admiration, and the terror of England, is subject to scoffs, and flung ingloriously into a filthy sink.*

According to the only biography of the champion written in the past 170 years—*Dan Donnelly, His Life and Legends*, by Patrick Myler—the arm soon found itself at the medical college of Edinburgh University, where it was disinfected and lacquered and used in anatomy lessons. It then played out the 19th century as an exhibit in a traveling circus.

In 1904 a Belfast bookmaker and barkeeper named “Texas” McAlevey purchased the limb and displayed it at a pub called (aptly) the Duncairn Arms. Later it was relegated to the attic of McAlevey’s betting shop on Winetavern Street, where it was dismissed as just another commonplace severed human body part. Then a wine merchant named Donnelly (no relation) bought it just for fun, and he gave it in 1953 to a man named James Byrne, who owned the Hideout in Kilcullen, the nearest village to the rolling Curragh where George Cooper’s mandible had been shattered so many decades before. And there it has remained.

Most guidebooks to Ireland don’t mention Donnelly’s Arm or the fight with George Cooper or the Hideout Olde World Pub. However, the wonderful mummies in the crypt at the Anglican Church of St. Michan’s in Dublin, just a block from Dan Donnelly’s Greek Street deathbed, draw tourists by the busload. And the detached, yet still miraculously undecayed, head of St. Oliver Plunkett, who was executed in 1681, draws myriad supplicating pilgrims to the town of Drogheda, north of the capital. So it is not an aversion to the public display of whole or dismantled dead Irish people that is to blame for the arm’s relative obscurity.

Neither, to be sure, is it the fault of Myler, a boxing columnist and assistant editor at the *Evening Herald* in Dublin. In fact, it is Myler who has labored most diligently to keep the expired champion alive. Across the street from the offices of his newspaper is a small restaurant called, undeservedly, the Ritz, and it is here that Myler and I meet one afternoon to drink tea and talk about Dan Donnelly. The journalist seems alternately bewildered and delighted that a foreigner should be interested in such parochial arcana. His eyes ask, Why aren’t you off driving the Ring of Kerry or kissing the Blarney Stone? But we’ve done that already.

“At the launching of my book in 1976,” says Myler, a benign and bespectacled man (like me), “Jim Byrne brought the arm to Dublin. I wanted to take it home, lest it be stolen, but my wife refused. She said, ‘I’m not letting that thing in my house. What if the rest of him comes looking for it?’”

“Has there been much written about Donnelly?” I ask.

“Yes,” says Myler. “Mostly by me.”

The burial ground at the Royal Hospital once was called Bully’s Acre, but I don’t know why. It is located at the northwest corner of the landscaped grounds of the magnificent old sanatorium, surrounded by a high stone wall and the roaring traffic of the South Circular Road. Somewhere in there, I presume, lie the remains of the remains of Dan Donnelly.

I am craning through the window of a hurtling city bus, crumpling my map in fevered anticipation. Beside me is my stoic

**While Byrne dreams of marching up Fifth Avenue on St. Patrick’s Day with his prize possession, the rest of Donnelly rests—in peace—in the Royal Hospital cemetery.**



wife, who already has endured the St. Michan’s mummies and Oliver Plunkett’s severed head and who now is being dragged off to hunt for a tomb that almost assuredly does not exist. And we are bound for further delights this morning: a tour of the Kilmainham Gaol, the hulking prison where many of the heroes of the 1916 Easter Rising were summarily shot. It’s across the street from the cemetery.



The wall around the burial ground is seven feet in height. I try to stand at its base and jump as high as I can, but all I can see are trees. Dejectedly, I walk along the barrier for a while and come to a battered blue wooden door.

"There's no way that door isn't locked," I say.

"Why don't you try it," my wife, always the optimist, suggests.

"Why bother?" I shrug and then, playing with the handle just for effect, I find that (of course) the door is unbolted.

Myler says that 20 years ago he was informed by an elderly cemetery caretaker of the exact location of Dan Donnelly's (unmarked) vault. The old man's tale may have been true or it may have been invention, but either way, Myler, to his credit, wouldn't share the secret with me. So now my wife and I are through the blue door and crashing through the underbrush like David Attenborough in pursuit of orangutans.

After a few moments of this, we discover, nearly hidden in the rampant shrubbery, great stone angels and fractured cherubs in states of wonderful dilapidation. For accompaniment, there is bird-song and a small brown rabbit. We come



across a couple of tombstones in this hauntingly tumbledown field, with their inscriptions legible. There is a Henry Walker from 1823 and a John Dinnham, interred one year later. We find no Donnelly, but it doesn't matter. The searching has been reward enough.

"Do you know what I'd love to do?" Desmond Byrne asks me. We're sitting at

one of the antique treadle sewing machines, beneath the 12-foot Indian crocodile, at the Hideout Olde World Pub in County Kildare. Byrne, a slim, red-bearded, well-mannered man, inherited the Hideout from his father and grandfather, and with it, of course, Dan Donnelly's dead right arm.

"What?" I reply.

"I would like to take it to America and march with it in the St. Patrick's Day Parade."

We're looking up at the display case where the relic rests, along with a couple of contemporary portraits of the champion and a copy of Myler's book. The arm is fully extended, the fingers curled, with the exception of the index finger, which is pointing right at the ale taps, as Sir Dan himself undoubtedly would be were he still alive and attached. A couple of bus tours have arrived, and delegations of well-lubricated Britons are snapping photos of the hoary thing.

So far, insurance costs and fear of mishap have kept the arm from being paraded up Fifth Avenue. Once, when a visiting Welsh rugby team let slip that it planned to swipe the arm and hold it for ransom—probably beer—Byrne took it home for safekeeping. The next morning, upon opening the pub, he found a "bloody" joke-shop hand in the locked and alarmed display case. So he's skittish about transporting his meal ticket over the sea.

"How much do you think it's worth?" I ask.

"I can't value it," Byrne answers. "There's only one of it."

"Unless we dig him up and take his left arm," I interject, cleverly.

"I have this belief," Byrne goes on. "Things like this only have value when they're on the wall. Off the shelf, where people can't see it, it has no value. Look at all the Van Goghs disappearing into private hands. That's terrible."

I ask Byrne if I may take a photograph of him with Donnelly's Arm. He unlocks the display case and takes the arm out and sits on a barstool, holding it tenderly, around the wrist, like a father leading his child to school.

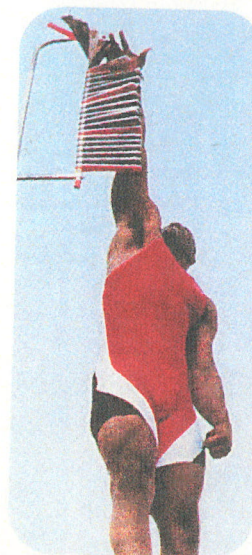
"I suppose it brings out the cannibal in us," my host says, pondering the remnant of humanity with which he is posing on a perfect Saturday noon in the green heart of Ireland.

"It's the reflection of our mortality," I ruminate. "It points to the unknown."

"Yes," the publican replies. "Why do we love horror? We haven't really left the caves, I guess."



Sports Illustrated Television



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