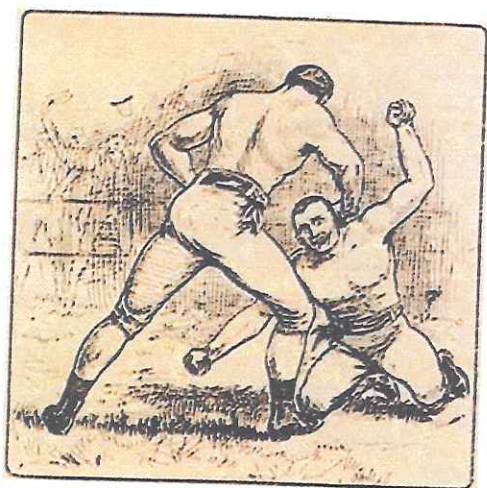


LOCAL HISTORY

The Long Arm



It seems that every locality in Ireland has colorful stories, characters, history. Seán Carberry looks at the lengthy legend centered on the world heavyweight champion boxer who fought in the Curragh of Kildare.



Above: An old illustration depicting the long-limbed Donnelly in the ring.

Just three years ago, Ireland's world heavyweight boxing champion arrived in New York to take part in a pugilistic exhibition at the Irish Center. At least, his arm did. It belonged to Dublin fight legend Dan Donnelly, who died nearly 200 years ago. His upper limb, to coin a phrase, keeps marching on, although the latest news on it is that it's gone underground – again.

The storyline is worthy of a Daniel Day Lewis movie. Donnelly was born in Townsend Street, near the Dublin docks, in March 1788, the ninth of 17 children. He was well built – over six feet (1.82 meters) tall – but the rumor that his arms were extraordinarily long, nearly reaching his knees as he stood upright, was merely an early version of a PR stunt.

For a time he worked as a carpenter, but in between jobs he was to be found in taverns around the city, practicing his hard drinking and hard hitting. He was discovered by a Kildare horse trainer, a certain Captain Kelly, who saw Donnelly demolishing friends and enemies with ease during a bar brawl. Kelly, recognizing Donnelly's potential, persuaded him to take up boxing as a career, so he switched to the bare-knuckle boxing that was the only show in town at the time.

Compared to modern boxers, his career was literally meteoric – he took part in only three major fights, and won all three, thus laying claim to the title of world champion.

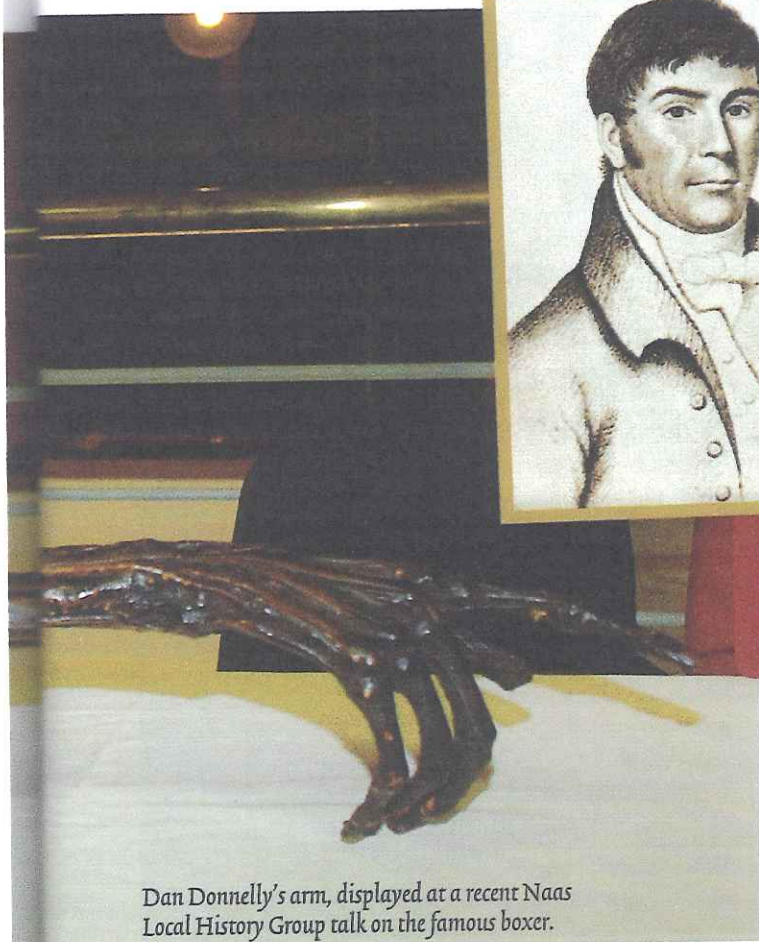
Two of those fights were staged at the Curragh of Kildare, in a place known then as Belcher's Hollow. On 14th September



A TRIBUTE TO THE GREAT DAN

As can well be imagined, the story of Dan Donnelly's arm is the subject of great interest in and around Kildare. Larry Breen, secretary of the Federation of Local History Groups in the county, recently gave a fascinating talk to the Naas Local History Group on the subject. He ended his remarks with an appeal: "It seems a great shame that this remarkable Irishman (Dan) who was worshipped by the people, a national hero in his own lifetime, a champion for the then downtrodden and poverty stricken Irish masses, renowned and respected by the

English public and known worldwide for his prowess in the boxing ring should be largely forgotten. Dan Donnelly deserves much more! We owe him at least some form of public commemoration, especially in his native city of Dublin." Now, there's an idea...



Dan Donnelly's arm, displayed at a recent Naas Local History Group talk on the famous boxer.

1814, a crowd of 20,000 watched Donnelly defeat Englishman Tom Hall in a nonstop bloody bout. In those days, there were no three minute rounds – it began with two men standing, and ended whenever there was only one upright. Following the battle, Belcher's Hollow became known as Donnelly's Hollow, and today an obelisk marks the site.

Donnelly returned to the Curragh on 13th December 1815, where he took on another Englishman, George Cooper. Once more blood flew, and it ended with Donnelly breaking Cooper's jaw after 22 minutes, thereby collecting his prize of sixty pounds sterling.

His world title encounter came on 21st July 1819, when he went to England to confront Tom Oliver in Sussex, and returned victorious, with the title of world heavyweight champion. Mind you, there was no World Boxing Association then to arbitrate such claims, but no one seemed to mind at the time. Then, like many a pugilist after him, he went into the bar trade, only to become his own best customer.

He died at the age of 32 in 1820, suitably in his own pub. He was buried, appropriately enough, in the cemetery of the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, which was Dublin's equivalent of Les Invalides in Paris – a home for old and wounded warriors, which today is a splendidly restored museum and conference center.

But the Donnelly story didn't end there. Shortly after his death, a group of medical students dug him up, to use his

body for their studies at the Royal College of Surgeons, an act that caused riots in the streets of Dublin when the word of the grave-robbing spread.

The story goes that a prominent surgeon at the College recognized his newly purchased cadaver as Donnelly. So before having it suitably reburied, he cut off the lanky right arm, arranged it like Michelangelo's depiction of Adam—the extended finger accepting life—and mummified it in red lead paint. It has been measured at almost three feet – nearly a meter – long.

There is subsequently great murkiness about the movement of the arm. It is believed that when it moved from the Royal College of Surgeons it developed an independent existence, with sightings of it in Edinburgh and Belfast, until it finally surfaced in the Hideout bar in Kilcullen, County Kildare.

"It has been measured at almost three feet – nearly a meter – long"

The Hideout establishment was run by the Byrne family for many years, until its sale to new owners in more recent times. Mrs. Josephine Byrne, widow of the former proprietor, was reported as saying that when they sold the Hideout in 1995, they agreed to leave Donnelly's arm temporarily in the care of the new owners.

"The new owners sold up after just two years – so the arm was taken from the pub and returned to us," she said. "We have no intention of putting it back up in the Hideout again, the pub keeps being re-sold and we want to make sure it is protected. It will remain in the possession of our family."

She says she will never sell it. "I couldn't put a price on it," she said. "The sentimental value is too high. This is something that has been in the family for 57 years, and to us it is priceless."

And there the arm rests. 🍀