

# DAN DONNELLY – THE MAN AND THE MYTHS

By Patrick Myler

On the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his most celebrated victory on the Curragh of Kildare, around 30 local historians and a few knowledgeable schoolkids gathered recently at Dan Donnelly's monument to pay homage to Ireland's first sporting hero.

A floral wreath was laid at the foot of the 8ft obelisk which marks the spot where Donnelly smashed Englishman George Cooper to defeat in the 11<sup>th</sup> round of a brutal bare-knuckle battle on November 13, 1815. The victor's footprints were dug out by his supporters as he strode up the slope to his carriage. Visitors still take delight in literally walking in his footsteps at the place known as Donnelly's Hollow.



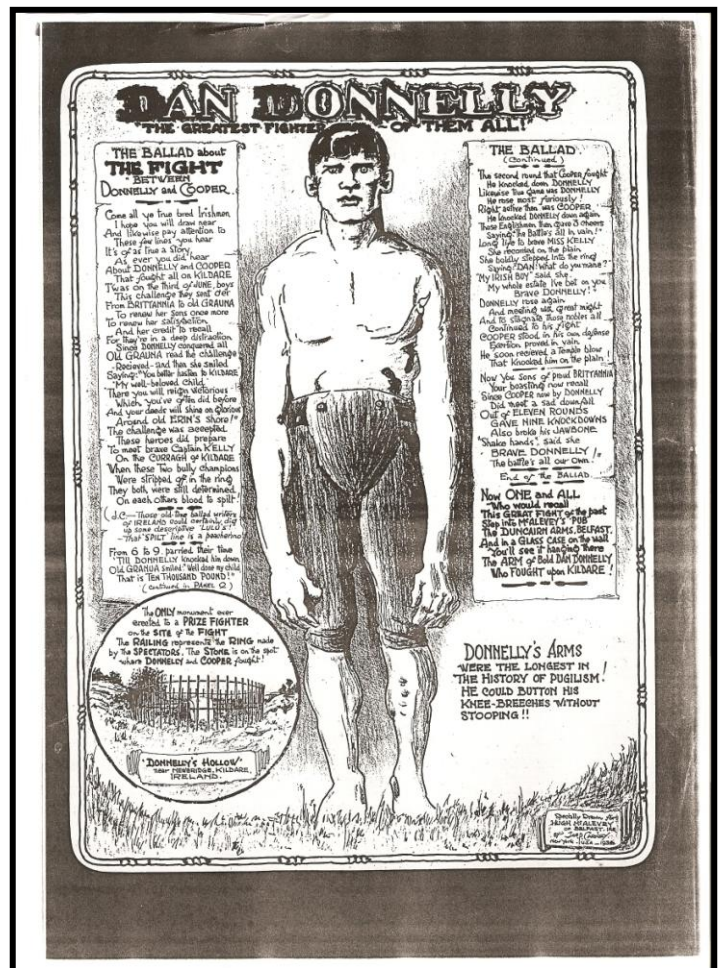
Dan Donnelly

As Donnelly's biographer, I was asked to say a few words and I recalled that my first article written on Dan was in 1964, over half a century ago, for *Boxing Illustrated*. My book on Donnelly's colourful life was published in 1976 and re-issued with updates in 2010.

Accompanying me on my recent visit to Kildare was Grace Hilliar, who is working on producing a feature film based on my book. She has purchased an option on the film rights and has written a screenplay, but the fulfilment of all projects such as this largely depend on generous financial support. Grace loves the Donnelly story and thinks it will make a blockbuster movie.

One of the main problems I encountered when doing my initial research into Donnelly's life was separating fact from fantasy. Several of the stories passed down over the centuries do not bear up in relation to the official records.

For instance, it is claimed that Dan had the longest arms in the history of pugilism, that he could fasten his knee breeches without stooping. What was he – man or gorilla? Some years ago I measured his preserved right arm (more about that later) against mine and it is not of abnormal length for a man of 6ft, which he was.





And then there's the yarn about him receiving a knighthood from Britain's Prince Regent, who later became King George the Fourth.

As Dan himself told it, he accepted an invite to the prince's London residence to be greeted with the flattering remark: "I am glad to meet the best man in Ireland". To which the cocky pugilist replied: "I'm not that, your royal highness, but I'm the best in England".

After downing the contents of a bottle of Irish whiskey between them, the prince surprised Dan by requesting him to spar with him. Donnelly, taken aback, expressed his fear that he might cause the prince some damage.

"Fear not," came the response. "Do your worst, Dan, and devil may care".

After a few minutes of harmless sparring, Donnelly, by instinct, let fly with a right-hander that sent the portly royal flying backwards onto his throne.

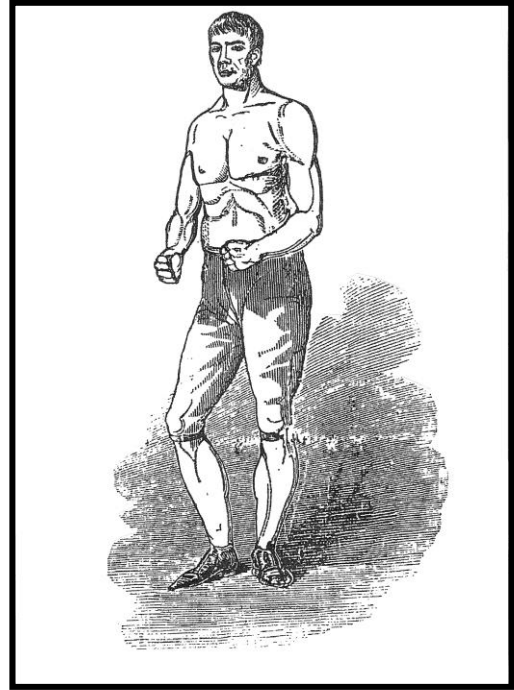
All apologies, Dan feared for his life when the prince took up a sword and told him to kneel before him. But decapitation was not the penalty to be paid for his rash action.

Instead, the prince laid the sword on each of his shoulders while proclaiming, "You went down on your knees as plain Dan Donnelly. Now arise as Sir Daniel".

It's a good yarn, for sure, but there is no official confirmation of the alleged ceremony. Nonetheless, Donnelly was not shy about calling himself "Sir Dan" from that day onwards.

So to the more reliable details of Donnelly's life, in and out of the ring. He was born, the ninth of 17 children, including four sets of twins, in a tough docklands part of Dublin around 1788 (some reports say 1786, others even earlier). Apprenticed to a carpenter on leaving school, he got into a bar fight with a bully and knocked him cold. Onlookers advised him to try his hand at boxing and he soon became champion of Dublin.

He came to the notice of Captain William Kelly, a wealthy landowner, horseman and gambler. Kelly offered to sponsor Donnelly while he got into top condition under the care of renowned Scottish trainer Robert Barclay Allardice, better known as 'Capt Barclay', who had trained English champion Tom Cribb among others. Both Kelly and Barclay had to keep a close eye on their pupil as he was inclined to skip training in favour of the local taverns and the attentions of adoring females.



Donnelly got his first real test when Tom Hall, an English pugilist in Ireland to teach the art of boxing and to box exhibitions, agreed to a match with the Irishman. On September 14, 1814, an estimated 20,000 people packed the spot that became known as Donnelly's Hollow. Dan, despite his lack of experience, was the bigger and stronger man and quickly took command. Hall cynically dropped to the ground whenever he was under severe pressure.

Under the prevailing rules drawn up by Jack Broughton, a round ended when a man touched down, allowing him a 30-second rest until time was called for the next round.

Donnelly, frustrated by his opponent's tactics, lashed out with a right-hander in the 15<sup>th</sup> round that caught the kneeling Hall on the side of the head, drawing blood from his ear. The Englishman's seconds, claiming a foul, refused to let the action continue, while Donnelly's side insisted that Hall had lost the fight for going down so often without being hit. Pierce Egan, writing in *Boxiana*, offered the opinion that 'both of the contestants lost it'. Whatever about the controversial ending, Donnelly's supporters wildly celebrated his 'victory'.

A year later, at the same location, Dan scored his most famous success when he defeated another leading English fighter, George Cooper (often wrongly described as the English champion), after 22 minutes. The last punch broke Cooper's jaw.

The victory was celebrated in numerous ballads and poems and gave rise to several fanciful side stories, such as the role allegedly played by Capt Kelly's sister. According to the legend, Donnelly, at one point in the battle, looked like he was heading for defeat, until the lady slipped him a piece of 'magical' sugar cane between rounds. The candy had the desired effect. Donnelly was roused to regain the upper hand and go on to victory. Was this the first instance of a boxer gaining an advantage by taking a performance enhancing substance?

Record compilers should note that the date of the fight was November 13, 1815, not December 13 as widely reported. The fundamental blame for the error rests with Pierce Egan, the foremost boxing authority of the bare-knuckle era, who gave the wrong date in *Boxiana*. As no one doubted Egan's word, the mistake has been perpetuated over the past 200 years. When I was doing my original research in the 1970s for my book on Donnelly, I was unable to find any reports of the fight in the newspapers published in the days after the December date. Not back then having the benefit of the modern indispensable tool, the internet, I merely assumed that the contest was not reported. I had no reason, at that time, to go back a month in my research and, regretfully, took the date given by Egan as authentic. Recent diligent research by Kildare librarian Mario Corrigan confirmed the November date. The *Freeman's Journal* and *Carrick's Morning Post* both carried next-day reports of the fight.

Donnelly's victory was so wildly celebrated that he was portrayed as a champion of the Irish cause for freedom of domination by the British government (all of Ireland then being under Westminster rule). Every time he bloodied a British nose, it was seen as a blow against the might of the British Empire.

Donnelly attempted to cash in on his fame by taking over the running of three Dublin taverns, but such was his habit of dispensing free alcohol to his pals, plus drinking much of the profits himself, his initial ventures as a businessman flopped. He decided to go to England, where pugilism was at the peak of its popularity. Although his initial aim was to confine his ring outings to exhibitions, wearing padded gloves, he was persuaded that the real money was to be made in actual barefist battles.

A match was made with Tom Oliver, a leading contender for the championship of England. Oliver had an impressive record that included wins over Ned Painter, Harry Lancaster and Donnelly's last opponent, George Cooper. Dubbed 'bravest of the brave' by one writer, he was described by another as 'a thick-eared old warrior with a mug like a map of the United Kingdom'. The fight, on July 21, 1819, was scheduled to take place on Bledlow Common in Buckinghamshire, but fears of a swoop by the local constabulary necessitated a late switch to Crawley Downs, in Sussex, 60 miles away. Bad news for the boys who had risen at the crack of dawn to claim their 'roosting places' in the trees overlooking the original site.

In a bitter battle lasting one hour and 20 minutes, Donnelly found himself regretting that he had too often sneaked away from his training camp 'in pursuit of game and not of the feathered variety', as one writer put it. He also appeared to hurt his right hand early on and had to rely mainly on his left, keeping the damaged hand in reserve until he was sure he could use it to deliver the knockout blow, however much it might hurt him. His bravery and perseverance paid off when he finished off Oliver in the 34<sup>th</sup> round. A hard right followed by a mighty cross-buttock (more of a wrestling manoeuvre, but permissible under Broughton's rules) sent the Englishman crashing to the turf. Oliver was picked up by his seconds and taken to his corner, where his head hung limp 'as if it had been disconnected'. He was unable to answer the call of time for the next round.

Donnelly, on returning home to Ireland, insisted he was finished with the prize ring and intended to concentrate on making a success of his fourth Dublin tavern. He seemed to have learned the lesson from his previous failed ventures and business at the *Shining Daisy* in Pill Lane was brisk.

Sadly, it all came to a sudden halt when he took ill and died, on February 18, 1820. His age was variously reported to be anything from 32 to 44. Several explanations were given for the cause of his death, the most plausible being that his habit of consuming large quantities of cold water after getting into a heavy sweat following a strenuous ball game delivered the fatal knockout. Water intoxication, also known as hyper hydration or water poisoning, can cause a potentially fatal disturbance of brain function due to the rapid intake of water.

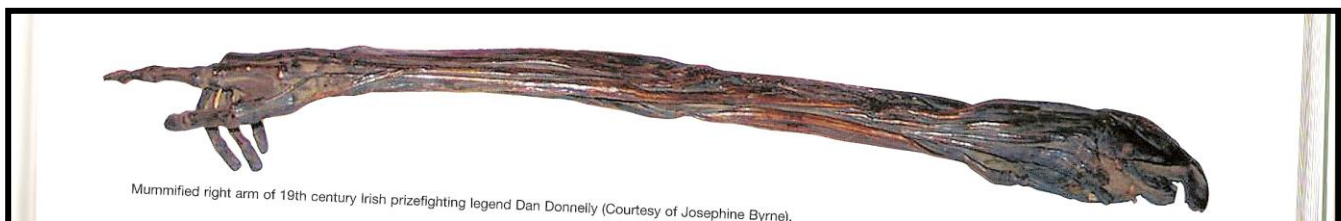
Extraordinary scenes of mourning marked his funeral. Shops and business were closed as a mark of respect, shots were fired in a Phoenix Park salute and huge crowds lined the streets as the hearse, with the Irish champion's gloves resting on a silk cushion atop the coffin, made its way to the Bully's Acre graveyard at Kilmainham. His particular popularity with the country's poorer classes was noted by The Sporting Magazine, which reported that 'at least 80,000 men, women and children attended the funeral, the roads and streets to the burial ground being covered with a moving mass of rags and wretchedness'.

But the Dan Donnelly story was not to end there.

Body snatchers raided the grave in the early morning after the burial and, by prior arrangement, took their prize catch to the premises of an anatomy professor. The grisly, but lucrative, trade was prevalent because there wasn't enough corpses available to meet the needs of the many anatomy schools. By law, the only bodies that could be used for dissection were those of executed murderers. Clearly there wasn't enough people murdered to meet the schools' demands for 'working material'. It wasn't until 1832, 12 years after Donnelly's death, that the law was changed to allow the schools to accept donated cadavers.

When word got out that Donnelly's corpse had been stolen, there was a public outcry and the authorities feared there would be riots. The professor, getting panicky, abandoned his plan to use the specimen in anatomy classes and returned it to the Bully's Acre. Nobody noticed before the re-burial, however, that the well-wrapped body was minus its right arm.

The severed limb, having being treated for preservation, was shipped away to Scotland where it was used for several years at anatomy schools. It then came into the hands of the owner of a travelling show who made good money from his odd exhibit. By the 1890s, Donnelly's arm was displayed in a glass case at the Duncairn Arms tavern in Belfast. Famous Irish-American pugilist Jake Kilrain was among those who called in to have a look.



Mummified right arm of 19th century Irish prizefighting legend Dan Donnelly (Courtesy of Josephine Byrne).

By the 1950s the arm had transferred to The Hideout bar in Kilcullen, County Kildare, just a couple of miles from the site of Donnelly's fights with Hall and Cooper. There it remained until the tavern was sold in 1997 and the arm passed into private ownership.

When New York businessman Jim Houlihan launched his Fighting Irishmen exhibition at the Irish Arts Center in Manhattan in 2006, the item that drew most attention was Dan Donnelly's preserved arm. He had arranged for it to be carried in the cockpit of an Aer Lingus jet because the owner didn't want to risk it getting damaged if stored in the hold. The Fighting Irishmen exhibition transferred to Boston College before moving across the Atlantic to several locations in Ireland.

Since then, the arm has gone into hiding, but I understand efforts are being made to find a secure viewing location for what is truly the most remarkable specimen of boxing memorabilia in history.

**Patrick Myler is an author and boxing historian. His other books include Gentleman Jim Corbett, the Truth Behind a Boxing Legend; A Century of Boxing Greats; The Fighting Irish; and Ring of Hate: the Brown Bomber and Hitler's Hero. He lives in Dublin, Ireland.**

***Patrick Myler's book, Dan Donnelly (1788-1820) Pugilist, Publican, Playboy, re-issued in 2010, is available on amazon.com or by contacting the author at [patrickmyler@eircom.net](mailto:patrickmyler@eircom.net)***

