

DAN DONNELLY – FROM THE NEWSPAPER ARCHIVES

By Patrick Myler (2018)

While researching my family history via www.findmypast.ie website, I took a detour to see if I could find any new information on Dan Donnelly, the Irish bare-knuckle champion of 200 years ago. (My last article on him was published in the IBRO Journal of December 2015).

What I found was newspaper articles, news items and letters relating to the Irish champion that I had not come across before. They include reports of one of Donnelly's early unrecorded fights, a thwarted romance with "Miss Kelly", his patron's sister, some comments on his character, vandalism to the monument in Donnelly's Hollow, confirmation that he was granted the deeds of his last of his four Dublin bars, and information on two previous custodians of Donnelly's preserved right arm.

DONNELLY'S ENTRY INTO BOXING

Leinster Leader, 3 Sept 1949: Article headlined 'A knight of the people: the story of Dan Donnelly' authored by 'Captain McGoldrick'

The writer stated that "in 1810 Dublin was literally invaded by professional boxers from across the channel, all anxious to teach boxing to the Irish. Boxing booths spread rapidly throughout the city, with sparring the popular pastime".

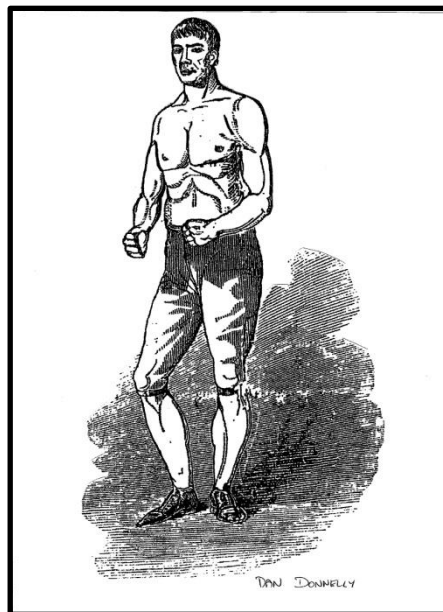
Elimination competitions were staged and in one of these, the final was contested by "Frazer, of Ringsend, and Donnelly, of Townsend Street. These met on the quays on a March evening of 1814, Donnelly winning a desperate fight within 15 minutes".

Capt Kelly, of Maddenstown, Co Kildare, witnessed the fight and was so impressed with Donnelly's display that he sought an introduction. "Within a week," said the writer, "Donnelly found himself being driven up the avenue of Maddenstown House in a carriage and pair. A great sportsman and a courageous youth became firm friends. Later, a guest of Maddenstown House, Capt Barclay, a first-rate performer in amateur circles, had a try-out with Donnelly and, as a result, became an enthusiastic supporter of Kelly's plan".

The writer described Donnelly's fight with Tom Hall on the Curragh, which ended in dispute, with both men claiming victory. Hall refused to continue the fight after he had been struck while he was down, and Donnelly claimed he deserved to be named the winner as his opponent had regularly dropped to the turf without being hit. Afterwards, when asked about the encounter, Donnelly remarked, "Fight? I didn't see any fight. Hall went into the ring and sat down. I was paid a hundred pounds for looking at him."

McGoldrick next described Donnelly's fight with George Cooper, giving the common erroneous date of 13 December 1815 (It was actually 13 November). He said Dan's joy at his victory was spoiled when Miss Kelly, Capt Kelly's sister, revealed as she congratulated him that she wore an engagement ring. (Dan was clearly infatuated with the young woman who, while he trained for the fight, had paced his runs on horseback). "Is that ring real?" he asked. She answered with a nod.

"That was enough for Dan to rush from the scene without formality," said the writer. "He mounted the first available conveyance and set out for Dublin. One of his travelling companions remarked, 'Cheer up, Dan, you have just won the greatest fight ever'. Donnelly replied, 'It wasn't much of a fight when



the deadliest blow was delivered by a woman'. Never again could Donnelly be inveigled to visit Maddenstown House".

McGoldrick wrote that in August 1819, at the time of Donnybrook Fair, Donnelly "was presented with the title deeds of his favourite public house, in Pill Lane, the donors of which preferred to remain anonymous. Whispers of the period revealed Capt Kelly and Capt Barclay as the prime movers in the affair. The situation seemed ideal and, for a while, Dan's pub was a rendezvous for all and sundry".

The writer said of Donnelly's sudden death in February 1820: "He collapsed suddenly and died within the hour. It was said that a drink of cold water after exercise had cut short his colourful career."

PIERCE EGAN VISITS THE GRAVE

The Dublin Monitor, 13 May 1841: Letter from Pierce Egan, author of *Boxiana*, told of his visit to Dublin, which included a visit to Donnelly's tomb in Bully's Acre, Kilmainham.

Giving an account of Donnelly's cheerful personality and his aversion to training, Egan stated that he had "what was termed a wit at will. His 'doings' might admit of some doubt of being followed, but his 'sayings' always kept his visitors in a roar and his tavern in Capel Street was better attended in the evening than the theatre. He was the low comedian of the bar, taproom and parlour. Dan's jokes were all Irish. When he was in England training to fight Tom Oliver he would not take the necessary exercise, only when he was guided into a walk by some friend or other. Anything like prescribed rules he would not comply with".

DONNELLY AND THE TOUGH BAKER

The Derry Journal, 8 July 1932: Anonymous writer related an alleged confrontation between Donnelly and a Derry baker named James Doherty.

Doherty, said the writer, was a powerful man who regularly carried two sacks of flour under his arms for 250 yards to his bakery. "It is believed he was the only man feared by Dan Donnelly, who once stole a drink from him in a Derry public house. Doherty saw the drink gone when it was too late, but as he wheeled on the swift Donnelly his fist shot through a door panel, missing Donnelly by inches. It ended up in a smile with a few rounds of drinks. Doherty was one of the world's strongest men."

DONNELLY'S LIFE AND DEATH

The Derry Journal, 22 October 1883: Reprint of a letter send to the editor of *The Boston Post*

The writer (unnamed) said he was aged ten at the time of Donnelly's death in 1820. "I lived in Old Church Street, Dublin, and Dan kept a public house in Pill Lane, on the corner of Greek Street. It had the sign of Brian Boru (the last High King of Ireland) over the door. The last time I passed the house was in 1828 and the sign was still over the door.

"Donnelly was a very honest, quiet man, a carpenter by trade, and was said to be a very poor mechanic. He was a large man, not far from six feet in height. His flesh was so hard he might well be called an ironclad man and, although he had a bad issue on one of his legs, he was very nimble and active, as quick as a steel trap.

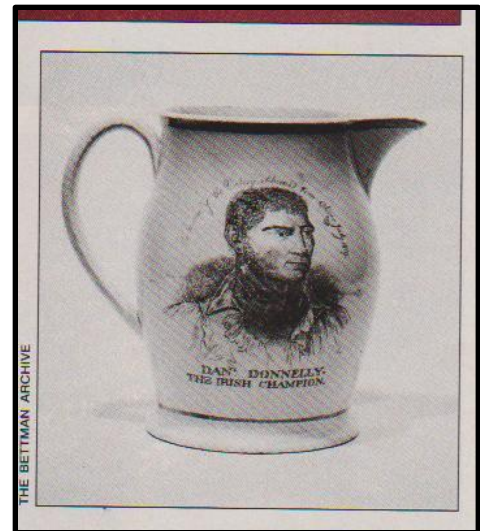
"He was never a street bully, nor ever thought of entering a ring until an accident happened. He was a great patriot and got into a political dispute with three very large Grenadier soldiers in Townsend Street chapel yard one Sunday evening. When they undertook to thrash him, he knocked them about like so many bags of bran. Captain Kelly, a sporting gentleman, took him in hand and taught him some of the rules of the ring."

The writer went on to describe Donnelly's fights with Tom Hall ("he tanned his hide in a short time") and George Cooper on the Curragh. For the latter fight, "many English and Irish sporting gentry were there and the noble-hearted Duchess of Leinster held the purse".

In 1819, said the writer, Dan's public house (bar) business was "broken down" and he travelled to England to make some money. After turning down a match with Tom Spring, he agreed to fight Tom Oliver, but he took no care to prepare for the bout.

"On the night before the fight, he was inveigled off from his friends by some Irish traitors and kept drinking until two o'clock in the morning. He lay on a bench in the bar room and rolled off and hurt his shoulder. It was very little breakfast he could eat." (The writer followed with a description of the contest).

"A day or two after the fight, he came back to Dublin and leapt ashore singing. My father was near to him and he saw neither scratch nor bruise on his face. Dan was a great ball player, both with hand and racket. On the fatal day he was in a great heat and drank freely of cold ale from a cellar and was suddenly taken very sick and died the next day."



DONNELLY'S HOLLOW MONUMENT ATTACKED

The Irish Times, 27 December 1888: A letter from a correspondent (signed S.R.H.) stated that he "stopped to look at the monument in Donnelly's Hollow, erected less than a year ago, and was shocked to find it mutilated in a shocking manner by some scoundrel, who must have used a cold chisel and heavy hammer to affect this ruffianly purpose. If the Curragh rangers cannot find out the miscreant to a dead man's prowess, cannot the soldiers of the Curragh camp do so and give him his desserts?"

The Freeman's Journal, 1 November 1899: In a brief news item, the paper reported damage to the Donnelly's Hollow monument, which had been "badly chipped and otherwise injured".

The Mirror of Life, 27 November 1909: The editor, J Frank Bradley, wrote about his visit to Donnelly's Hollow: "When I was at The Curragh I was much surprised, and disagreeably surprised, to find that the monolith which marks the scratch, or middle of the ring, had been much defaced, no doubt by visitors who wished for a memento of Donnelly's Hollow. The monument is all chipped at the corners and practically ruined and I wonder that a subscription has not been set on foot to replace or repair the stone. I cannot understand people who want a memento of the Hollow taking away a bit of stone which Donnelly never saw and which, in all probability, was not quarried till long after Donnelly died. Would it not be far more sensible to take a piece of the soil or turf on which Donnelly had trod? There is plenty of it, and it is safe to say that there is not a foot of the 20 square feet comprising the ring where Donnelly had not trod during the fight. I have a piece of the turf among my collection of curios and mementoes of the prize ring, and I value it far more than a piece of stone that Donnelly never set eyes on, much less feet."

DONNELLY'S ARM ON DISPLAY

The Daily Nation, 12 October 1899: Newspaper reported on an exhibition of curios and fine art, under the auspices of the Belfast Catholic Club Literary Society. Among the items displayed was "one of the mummified arms of Dan Donnelly, pugilist".

Belfast News-Letter, 1 June 1909: A front page advert announced an auction for the following day of items from the collection of Arthur McNernie that included “the right arm of Dan Donnelly, pugilist, in a case”.

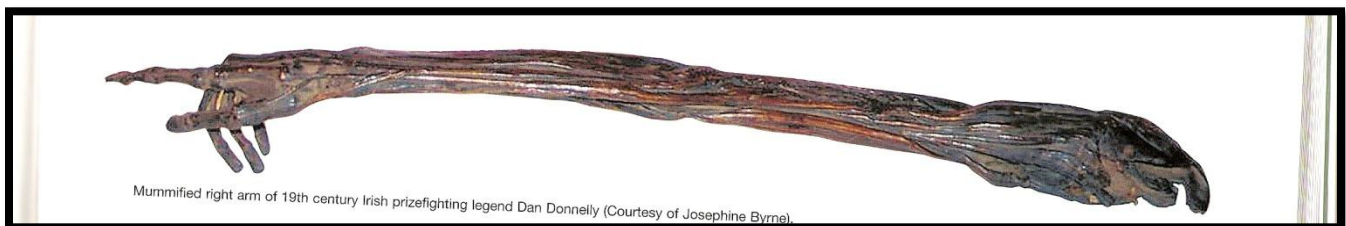
Belfast News-Letter, 18 November 1932: Newspaper recalled Arthur McNernie having “a wonderful collection of historical engravings, a great variety of bric-a-brac and quaint curios, including Dan Donnelly’s arm. One of his arms was kept by a student and handed down from father to son until it eventually came under the hammer and was sold to McNernie”.

The Derry Journal, 12 August 1910: Reporting the death of Arthur McNernie, the newspaper added, “One of his treasures was an arm of Dan Donnelly, former boxing champion of Ireland, which used be under inspection by visitors. It is now in the possession of Mr J.F. Bradley”.

The Weekly Telegraph (Belfast), 20 August 1910: Newspaper reported on the death of Arthur McNernie, “well known Belfast personality and oyster purveyor”, together with a photograph of McNernie’s Oyster Rooms in Arthur Square, Belfast. Suffering from advancing age and ill health, McNernie had put up for auction his collection of curios, including Dan Donnelly’s arm. The arm came into the possession of J. Frank Bradley, editor of *The Mirror of Life*, who had written about Donnelly. Bradley had disclosed that he purchased the arm from McNernie, adding: “I have it in my office and I shall be pleased to show it to any visitors who may call and see me when visiting London”.

The Mirror of Life, 12 February 1910: The editor, J Frank Bradley wrote: “Some months ago I wrote about Dan Donnelly’s arm, which I came across one day in Belfast. This arm has now come into my possession, and I am quite satisfied and convinced of its genuineness. From particulars I have gathered and letters and other documents I have seen, I am quite convinced that the body of Dan Donnelly was ‘burked’, which means dug up during the night, and carried to a hospital and sold to the surgeons and students for dissection and study. Being an interesting subject, Donnelly’s body would bring a good price and the ‘burkers’ knowing this, lost no time in disinterring the corpse and carting it to the hospital. Having worked their sweet will on the flesh and bones of the dead Donnelly, the remains were disposed of in some way, but one arm was kept by one of the students and surreptitiously conveyed home. Here it remained for many years and was handed down from father to son together with other treasures of the home. It eventually came under the hammer, being sold among the household items of a well-known surgeon, and bought by Mr Tom McInerney [actually Arthur McNernie] of Belfast, from whom I bought the relic. I still have it in the office and I shall be pleased to show it to any visitors who may call and see me when visiting London.”

[The term ‘burkers’ originated from the activities of the notorious criminal duo of Burke and Hare, who murdered at least 15 people in London in the early 19th century and sold the corpses for surgical dissection.]



Author’s note: Frank Bradley died in 1924. By then, Donnelly’s arm had come into the possession of Hugh “Texas” McAlevey, a colourful character who owned a string of bars and betting shops in Northern Ireland. McAlevey, born in Armagh in 1881, was said to have made his fortune in the USA and wore a huge, ten-gallon cowboy hat that earned him his nickname “Texas”. He was also described as “a raconteur, a singer of no mean ability, a bird fancier, a Belfast city councillor and

timeless traveller". He died in 1945 and his grave is marked by the biggest monument in Milltown cemetery, Belfast.

Donnelly's arm was displayed, in a glass case, at several of McAlevey's premises. A painting depicting Donnelly as having "the longest arms in the history of pugilism" was executed by New York artist Joseph P. Carney in 1934 for display in McAlevey's bar, the Duncairn Arms, in Duncairn Gardens, off Antrim Road. At another time, McAlevey kept the arm on display at his betting shop in Berry Street, Belfast. It was eventually relegated to the attic of another of McAlevey's betting shops, in Winetavern Street, Belfast, which Donnelly's ghost was said to have haunted.

On McAlevey's death, the arm passed to Tom Donnelly, a Belfast wine merchant, who was unrelated to the boxer. In the early 1950s the arm was acquired by James Byrne Junior, proprietor of The Hideout tavern in Kilcullen, County Kildare, about three kilometres from the scene of Donnelly's victory over George Cooper on the Curragh. It was on view there for over half a century until the bar was sold after the death of Des Byrne, Jim's son. The arm remains in the keep of the Byrne family, but is not currently on public display.

McAULIFFE DISCOVERS 'YOUNG DONNELLY'

The Washington Times, 1 November 1921: Report by W.S. Farnsworth stated that Jack McAuliffe, the former world lightweight champion, was returning to the land of his birth (he was born in Cork in 1866) to search for fighting talent. Among those recommended to him was Dan Donnelly, who claimed to be a great-grandson of the famous Irish champion. "Young Donnelly," wrote Farnsworth, "is 21 years of age, stands 5ft 11ins and weighs 196 pounds. He has been fighting around Dublin for three years and has been knocking them over." McAuliffe said: "If he is as good as they say he is, I think I can do something with him in a year. If history repeats itself, young Donnelly will follow in the footsteps of his ancestor and bring the championship back to Ireland."

Author's note: I have not found any further information on young Donnelly and whether McAuliffe pursued his interest in him.

DONNELLY'S MARRIAGE RECORD – OR NOT?

The records for Irish Roman Catholic marriages reveal a Daniel Donnelly married Mary Anne Shea at St Paul's Church, Arran Quay, Dublin, on 6 November 1815. As no information about their ages, addresses, etc. is shown, it is impossible to confirm this is Dan Donnelly, the boxer. If it was so, the date of the marriage was exactly one week before his fight with George Cooper on the Curragh. Could it be that, facing the possibility of dying or being seriously injured in the fight, Dan and Mary decided to get married then? There are many instances of men marrying just before going off to war or other life-threatening events.

Patrick Myler's book, Dan Donnelly, 1788-1820, Pugilist, Publican, Playboy, is available on amazon.com or from the author (email patrickmyler@eircom.net)