

IRISH DAN DONNELLY

Still On Tour

178 Years

After His

Death

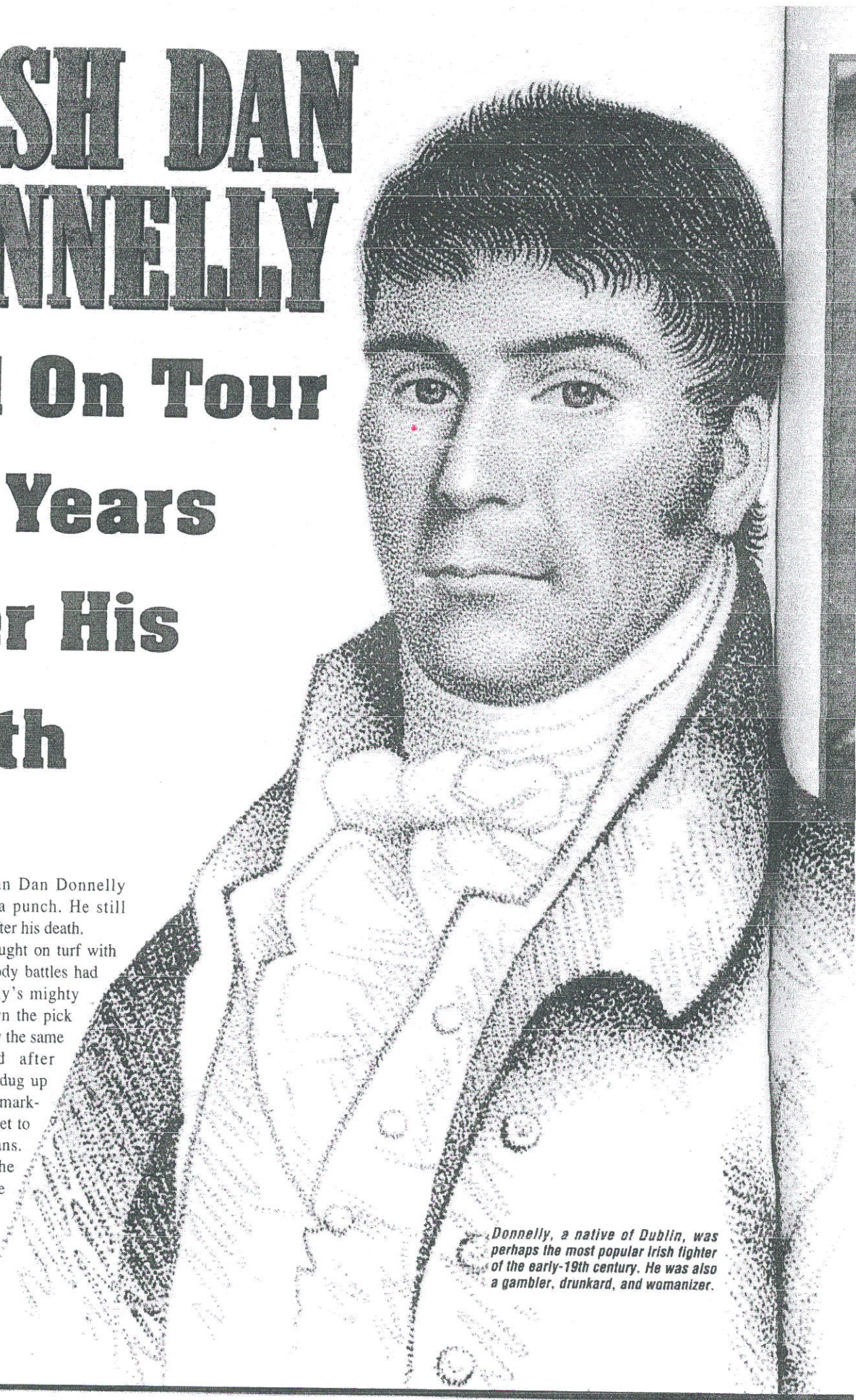
By Patrick Myler

Fighting Irishman Dan Donnelly always packed a punch. He still does, 178 years after his death.

When brave men fought on turf with bare knuckles, and bloody battles had no time limit, Donnelly's mighty right arm smashed down the pick of British pugilism. Now the same ethal limb, severed after Donnelly's corpse was dug up by graverobbers and remarkably well-preserved, is set to bowl over the Americans.

Des Byrne, owner of the world's most remarkable pugilistic memento, plans to take it on a U.S. lecture tour.

"I'm hoping to



Donnelly, a native of Dublin, was perhaps the most popular Irish fighter of the early-19th century. He was also a gambler, drunkard, and womanizer.



Until recently, Donnelly's arm was on display at The Hideout tavern in Kilcullen, County Kildare, Ireland, owned by Jim Byrne. Behind Byrne is a poster showing one of the many ballads written about Donnelly and an illustration that greatly exaggerates the length of his arms.

get sufficient backing to make such a trip worthwhile," said Byrne. "There has always been great interest in Donnelly's arm and endless demands for more information on its original owner."

For more than 40 years, the grisly relic was displayed at the Byrne family's tavern, The Hideout, in Kilcullen, County Kildare. Visitors would marvel at the sight of the blackened arm.

coated with preservative after it was severed from the fighter's body. Time after time, Byrne's late father, Jim, and Des himself, would be called upon to tell the story of the fighting hero and how his powerful right arm wound up in a glass case in an Irish bar.

Donnelly, born in Dublin in 1788, was idolized by his countrymen after his great victory over England's George Cooper on

the Curragh of Kildare, on December 13, 1815. Up to 20,000 spectators had arrived by whatever horse-drawn transport was available—many gladly walked the 30 miles from Dublin—to see the brawny carpenter smash Cooper's jaw with two terrific blows after 22 minutes of fighting.

As he strode up the hill of what is still known as Donnelly's Hollow after the fight, his fanatical followers dug out the impressions of his feet. They are still there today, leading from the monument commemorating the famous battle.

Bonfires were lit all over neighboring counties in celebration of Donnelly's victory, and taverns ran dry trying to meet the

demand. The hero of the hour happily joined in the festivities. By the time he arrived home in Dublin, eight days after the fight, Donnelly had hardly a penny left of his \$60 purse.

Among the many legends that grew from the occasion was the account of a character known as "The Sugar Cane Man." Just like the medicine men who sold their "magic elixir" off the backs of wagons in the Wild West, the Dublin street trader claimed wondrous qualities for his product.

Donnelly was having the worst of the fight against Cooper, so the story goes, when "Miss Kelly," sister of Donnelly's patron, Capt. William Kelly, slipped him a

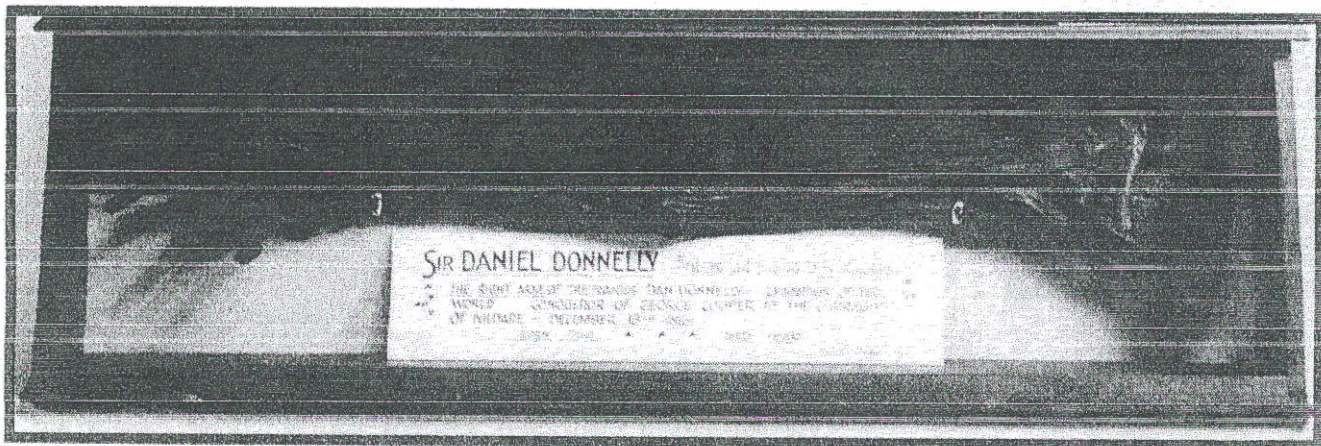
chunk of the candy.

"Now, me charmer, give him a warmer," she said. The rejuvenated Donnelly promptly delivered the knockout blow. If modern drug testing were available back then, Cooper might have been able to get the fight verdict declared void!

Mythology took over again when Donnelly traveled to England and was greeted by the Prince Regent. "Prinny," a renowned fight fan, supposedly laid the sword upon the Irishman's shoulders and declared him "Sir Daniel." If true, it would be the only time a member of the British royal family bestowed a knighthood on a fighter—and an Irishman at that! There is,

There is a monument in Curragh of Kildare commemorating Donnelly's epic victory over Englishman George Cooper in 1815. After the battle, fans dug up the impressions of footsteps their hero left behind as he strode away from what is called Donnelly's Hollow. They can still be seen today.





Prior to finding its way back home to Ireland, Donnelly's arm was exhibited at an English circus. But despite the legend that the fighter was knighted, there is no documentation to bolster the claim.

however, no documentary evidence that Donnelly was entitled to call himself "Sir Dan."

Another tall tale is that he had the longest arms in the history of the ring. Standing upright, it was said, he could button his knee-breeches without stooping. Actually, it is no longer than the limb of an average six-footer, which Donnelly was.

Hype about his invincibility was probably wishful thinking on the part of his blinkered fans. Though he never lost in the ring, Donnelly only had three major fights, and would have been a big underdog in a match with Tom Cribb, then the champion of England. Efforts to pair them came to naught.

Donnelly's only ring appearance on English soil was at Crawley Downs, in Sussex, on July 21, 1819. A sluggish Donnelly overcame some rough moments to defeat Tom Oliver in 34 rounds. He finished the bout with a hard right to the head and a tremendous cross-buttock. This tactic, executed by maneuvering an opponent on to the hip, then throwing him to the ground with force, was perfectly legitimate under the loose laws drawn up by English bare-knuckles champion Jack Broughton.

A hard drinker, gambler, and womanizer, Donnelly had nothing to show for his brief ring career. Even the four Dublin bars he ran at various stages failed to make a profit. He was either too generous with

free drinks for his pals or helped himself too often.

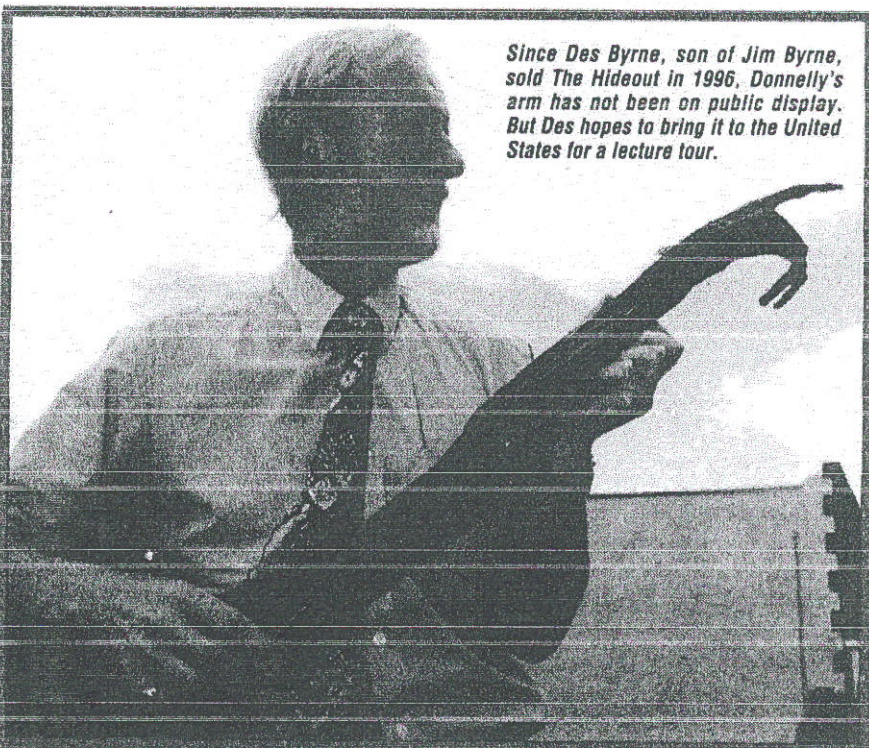
On February 18, 1820, Donnelly died of a fever, which followed a strenuous ballgame. He was only 32. Today, a wall plaque marks the site of his home above his last tavern, where he took the fatal count. But it is Donnelly's arm that continues to arouse the most interest.

When it was disclosed all those years ago that the body of the fighting Irishman had been stolen from his grave, there was a huge public outcry. The Dublin surgeon who had bought it from the bodysnatchers had it reburied, but only after secretly removing the arm. With its muscles and bones exposed, the limb proved a valuable asset for teachers of anatomy at Edinburgh University, Scotland. It then was passed to a circus owner who exhibited it on several tours of Britain.

In 1904, it was returned to Ireland and was on display at a Belfast bar for 50 years, until it came to rest at The Hideout. Unfortunately, it no longer holds pride of place there. When Des Byrne sold the bar in 1996 to run and develop a nearby gas station, he took his prized souvenir with him. He is now looking for a permanent home for the arm, where it can once again be available for public viewing. In the meantime, he wants to give Americans a first-hand look at the remarkable ring relic.

"If I can find a way to arrange a U.S. trip, I would be happy to show it to a wider audience," he said. "Donnelly's arm might be a gruesome sight, but it always is the center of attraction in the bar."

Patrick Myler is an Irish sports writer and the author of A Century Of Boxing Greats.



Since Des Byrne, son of Jim Byrne, sold The Hideout in 1996, Donnelly's arm has not been on public display. But Des hopes to bring it to the United States for a lecture tour.

Photo by Adrian Meola