



DAN DONNELLY (1788 – 1820) PUGILIST - REGENCY ROGUE

Born in the docklands area of Dublin City in 1788, Dan Donnelly became a legend in his own lifetime but his exploits and fame have now been largely forgotten. He became a heavyweight champion pugilist in the bare knuckle era of boxing, a publican, a playboy and a womaniser all rolled into one. He was a remarkable man who won the hearts and helped raise the spirits of an Irish population still suffering from the failed rebellion of 1798 and who lived in conditions of poverty and deprivation. A quiet boy, the ninth of seventeen children, he followed his father into the carpentry business.

A popular sport in the regency period was bare knuckle boxing. Dan was spotted during an altercation when he defended his aging father against insults from a visiting sailor in a Dublin pub. His ability as a fighter spread and he was talked into becoming a boxer, really against his will as he was naturally a quiet gentle man. He soon became the Dublin Champion. Two prominent members of the “fancy” – people who followed boxing – Cpt. William Kelly and Cpt. Barkley Allerdice were forever hearing the English “fancy” pouring scorn on Ireland’s man hood and honour. They were looking for someone to champion the Irish cause and they certainly found Ireland’s saviour in Dan Donnelly.

Dan Donnelly met and beat the best the English could provide and in particular his memorable victories at Donnelly’s Hollow in the Curragh County Kildare when he beat Tom Hall and George Cooper. He also beat Tom Oliver in England at Crawley Downs in Sussex.

He tried his hand at being a publican without any success spending too much time with his customers. He decided to go to England and earn a living boxing in exhibitions in places like Manchester, Liverpool and London. Being away from home and the influence of his wife and family he became a playboy and the darling of the fancy. He moved in high circles including the royalty and it is said that he was knighted by the Prince

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

Regent, becoming known as Sir Daniel Donnelly. His health suffered as a result of his wayward lifestyle, drinking and womanising and he was forced to return home to Ireland to his wife and family.

He came home to a hero's welcome and rode into his native Dublin on a white horse accompanied by his loyal fans. He again became a publican at the "Shining Daisy" near Greek Street and seemed to have settled down but he took ill suddenly and died in his wife's arms on 18th Feb. 1820 at the age of just 32.

Controversy followed Dan in death as it did in life. His body was stolen by body snatchers but due to a public outcry it was returned but not before the surgeon cut off his right arm. The arm had a chequered history, being first used in Edinburgh for medical research, then it travelled all around the UK in a travelling circus, was on show as an exhibit in the Duncairn Arms public house in Belfast and finally on exhibit for many years in the "Hideout" public house in Kilcullen Co. Kildare close to the scene of his famous victories over his English opponents. After the Hideout was sold in 1995 the arm now resides with the people who sold the pub, namely, the Byrne family.

Larry Breen