

## News

More news @ [www.limerickpost.ie](http://www.limerickpost.ie)

## HISTORY

# When John L Sullivan boxed in Limerick

by Pauline Murphy  
news@limerickpost.ie

LEGENDARY Irish American boxer John L Sullivan died 100 years ago on February 2, 1918, some 31 years after a triumphant visit to Limerick where large crowds greeted the famous prizefighter as he staged an exhibition bout in the city.

John Lawrence Sullivan was born on October 15, 1858 in Roxbury Massachusetts. His father Michael Sullivan, who hailed from Abbeydorney, was a builder's labourer who left his Kerry home in 1850 to make a better life across the Atlantic.

He had a fierce temper and a great lip for the booze, traits that were passed onto his son John L. His mother Catherine Kelly arrived in America from her home in Athlone and she sported a fine physique which dwarfed her husband. The Kellys were noted for their big hands and bulky physique and undoubtedly John L inherited the physical attributes of his mother's people.

He spent his teenage year scrapping in bars and yards across Boston until at the age of 18 he took up the sport of fist fighting seriously. He moved on to gloved boxing and it was at this discipline that he became the first man to make a million dollars from a sport, thus becoming America's first real sports star.

His fame was well known across the

globe and in Ireland he was feted as a son of Erin who had 'done good'. In December 1887, he decided to capitalize on his fame and went on a world tour.

He arrived in Dublin on the evening of December 11, 1887 for an exhibition bout in the Leinster Hall, now known as the RDS.

Two days later, Sullivan and his large entourage which included his manager, his doctor, his mistress, his sparring partners and some drinking buddies arrived in Waterford. From there he went to Cork where he put on a display against his sparring partner Jack Ashton after he refused to fight local amateur boxer Frank Creedon. Before he left Cork, Sullivan presented Creedon with a gold medal for bravery for having the courage to take on the world famous boxer!

On Thursday morning December 15, he took the train for Limerick and the Freeman's journal reported how Sullivan arrived in the treaty city to "a most enthusiastic welcome."

That evening he appeared at the Theatre Royal which was packed to capacity. Those who couldn't get in, streamed around the street outside, while those inside were treated to four fights featuring local fighters. Samuel Blakelock took on M. Hook while Nune Wallace took on Charles Williams. Jack Hickey beat Jim Kendrick while the bout between Charles Hipkiss and Frank Murphy ended in a draw.

When the time came for the main

event, the Limerick National band struck up Handel's "Hail the conquering hero" which Sullivan had adopted for his walkouts in fights. When he entered the ring to a rapturous applause, he gave a speech advocating Home Rule. Several dozen RIC constables in the theatre had their hands firmly gripped on their truncheons, in case the crowd which Sullivan was whipping into a frenzy, would start a riot.

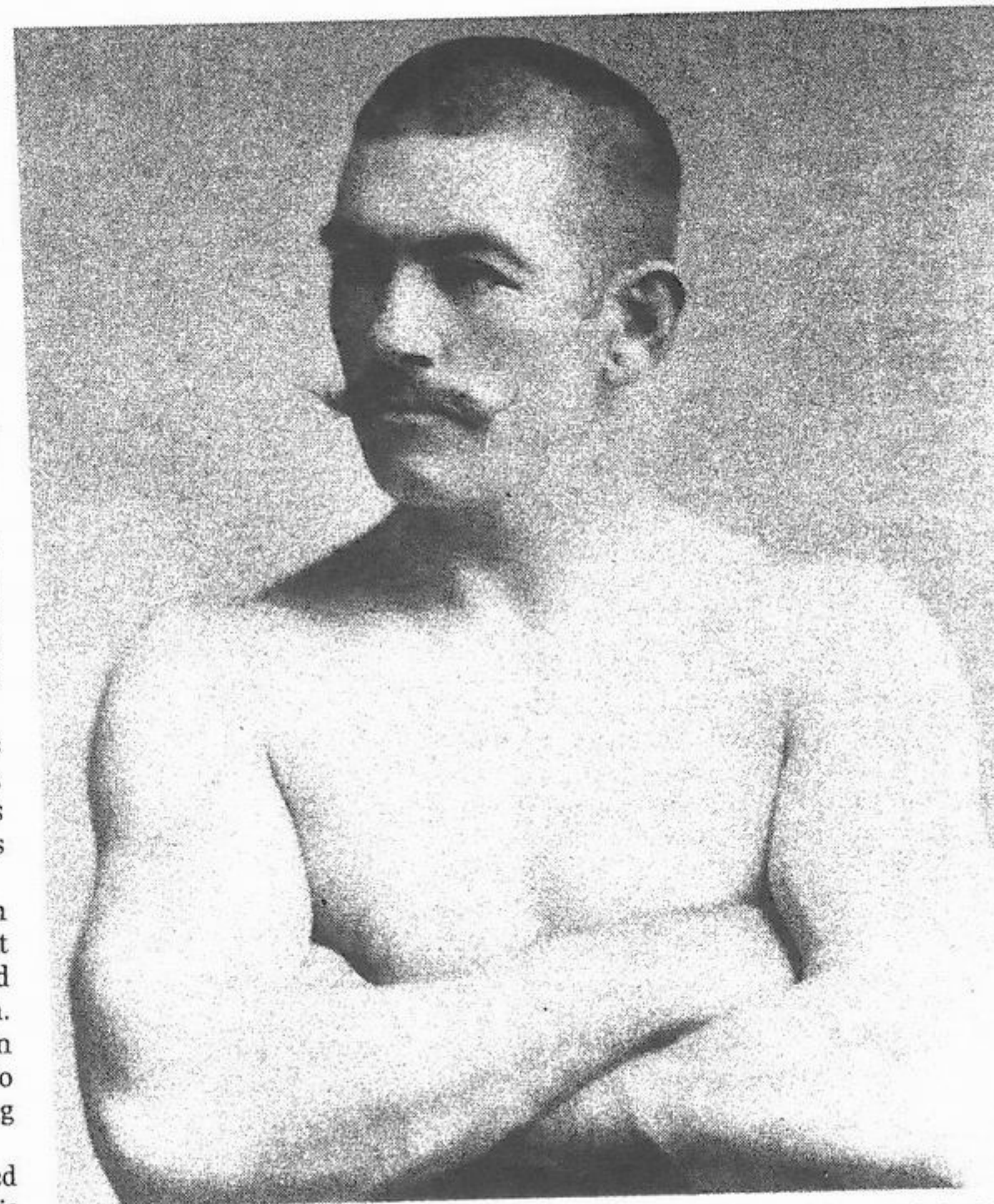
Sullivan then put on a display of four rounds with the overweight and, some even suspected, intoxicated Jack Ashton.

He received a hero's farewell the following day when he boarded the train for Dublin. He put on another boxing exhibition at the Leinster Hall before travelling to Belfast for another exhibition fight.

An egotistical man who loved the limelight, women, whiskey and money, Sullivan saw it all slip away as the years made him slower and older and his opponents grew younger and quicker.

He died from a heart attack in Massachusetts on February 2, 1918 at the age of 59 and was buried the old Calvary cemetery in Mattapan Boston. The harsh Winter weather resulted in frost hardening the ground and it had to be dynamited to bury the Boston Strong Boy.

A fitting end for a man who delivered many an explosive blow throughout his career in the ring.



John L Sullivan around the time of his visit to Limerick in 1887

**SALE NOW ON**