

*Muintir na Tire and the 'Emergency' in Limerick*

# POTATOES, TURF AND FIRESIDE CHATS

*by Eoin Devereux*

## INTRODUCTION

The national organisation, Muintir na Tire (People of the Land, or Country), has generally been regarded by sociologists of both rural and community development as being the main promoter of the work of Irish rural community development in the last fifty years. Founded in 1937 in Tipperary town by the Murroe, Co. Limerick, born Father (later Canon) John M. Hayes, the movement sought to organise and develop Irish rural communities along what it termed 'vocationalist' lines.

Like many other members of Muintir na Tire, Fr. Hayes was a Knight of Columbanus, and it was from discussions within that body's Primary Council that Muintir's programme was drafted.<sup>9</sup> Thus the two bodies were closely linked right from the start, and it was a constant recommendation of the Knights' Supreme Council that all Primary Councils should adopt the aims and objects of Muintir 'as a medium through which they could externalise and implement many of their activities'.<sup>10</sup>

Guilds of Muintir were formed in rural parishes and these subsequently appointed parish councils made up of representatives of various vocational or occupational groups in the different areas. It was hoped that these parish councils would then promote a wide range of development work. Muintir was, therefore, a prime mover in the domestic Catholic social movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and was strongly opposed to what it saw as excessive state intervention and conflict of either a partisan or class nature.

## THE POTATO SCHEME (1941-42)

The first major project, that of a potato allotment scheme, to which the city's Auxiliary Guild devoted its energies lasted only nine months and suffered many setbacks. The scheme proved to be problematic and uneconomic due to transport problems and, in particular, low potato yields. The idea for the first Muintir project in the city had come from the movement's heartland of Tipperary, where a similar project had previously been launched.

Under the terms of this scheme, people were invited to invest in units of £5. The holder of each unit was entitled to the produce of  $\frac{1}{8}$  of an acre, which (it had been calculated) would amount to approximately one ton of potatoes. By means of a 'club together' system, two or more people could jointly invest in a unit, and it was suggested that employees and firms could co-operate in this joint-unit scheme.

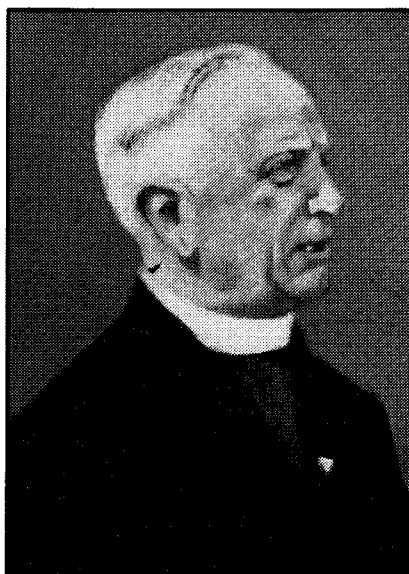
Among the members of the Limerick Chamber of Commerce were many who were either Muintir supporters or activists, so it was not surprising that the

This brief paper examines the work of the Limerick Associate Guild of Muintir na Tire during the Second World War, or what were rather euphemistically referred to as the 'Emergency' years. Following similar developments in both Cork and Dublin, the Limerick City Associate Guild was set up on 10 March, 1941, after a well attended public meeting held some two weeks previously, when Fr. Hayes and Muintir's organiser, J. O. Barry-Walsh, Kilmallock, had first mooted the idea of setting up a guild to tackle some of the difficulties being imposed by the war.

But because Muintir primarily wished to develop rural parishes (which they saw as unambiguously representing a 'community'), cities and towns could only hope for auxiliary status within the ranks of the movement. It must be stated, however, that in the case of Limerick City, following the setting up of the Auxiliary (or Associate) Guild, city parishes were encouraged to organise themselves on the traditional Muintir model.

Guilds were soon formed in St. Mary's, St. Michael's, St. John's, St. Patrick's and St. Munchin's parishes. As well as co-operating with the Associate Guild in its projects, these parish guilds involved themselves in a number of other schemes.

In June, 1941, St. Michael's Guild organised 'the collection of furniture and utensils for the needy families being transferred to the Killeely housing scheme'.<sup>11</sup> In 1944, both St. Munchin's and St. Michael's guilds were engaged in the promotion of gardening competitions.



*Canon John Hayes, from a portrait by Jack Donovan.*

Chamber decided to throw its weight behind the project.<sup>12</sup> Of the 126 acres planted at Shanagolden and Murroe, the

Chamber of Commerce had secured 100 acres on behalf of its members.

The total subscriptions to the potato scheme amounted to £5,000. However, several problems bedevilled the scheme, and it managed to lose £100. A Muintir sub-committee report on the project in January, 1942, noted:

*The yield per acre varied from 4 to 8 tons, and only a few growers produced the latter. To bring the average yield up to 6 tons, some farmers with low yields agreed to accept payment on the basis of 6 tons per acre, or 9d per stone, and the committee decided to purchase the extra potatoes from other farmers.<sup>13</sup>*

Two reasons were given for the shortfall in the yield. Firstly, the project started too late in the growing season, and secondly, farmers failed to receive the promised supplies of artificial manure.

Delays in the delivery of the potatoes to the city were blamed on a transport shortage caused by petrol rationing, and the guild's inability to secure a sufficient amount of sacks. However, a number of firms stepped in and supplied the guild

with lorries and sacks to ease these difficulties.

The sub-committee's report also noted that despite the majority of people being satisfied with the quality of the potatoes, there were some complaints about their size. Despite these problems, however, the Auxiliary Guild managed to provide potatoes at 10d per stone to its subscribers. Were it not for this scheme, the subscribers would have had to pay from 1/- to 1/3 per stone retail, or even a higher price later if a shortage had occurred.

But Muintir had reached the end of the line with the potato scheme. In April, 1942, it was decided that owing to the difficulties encountered by the guild in 1941-'42 season, the scheme would be permanently discontinued.

### THE PENNY - IN - THE POUND SCHEME (1941-'45)

In relative terms, at least, the Associate Guild's second major undertaking - the provision of both cheap and free fuel to the city's poor - was to prove the more successful. By the summer of 1941, the guild had decided to operate a scheme whereby employees and employers could give 1d of every pound they earned towards a fund to provide turf free or at a reduced rate to the poor of the city. The Chamber of Commerce again proved to be supportive of Muintir's plans.

It was initially suggested that the guild might run the fuel scheme on the same lines as its less successful sister project. But it was soon realised that the guild would have to limit its horizon to the provision of turf solely for those in need.

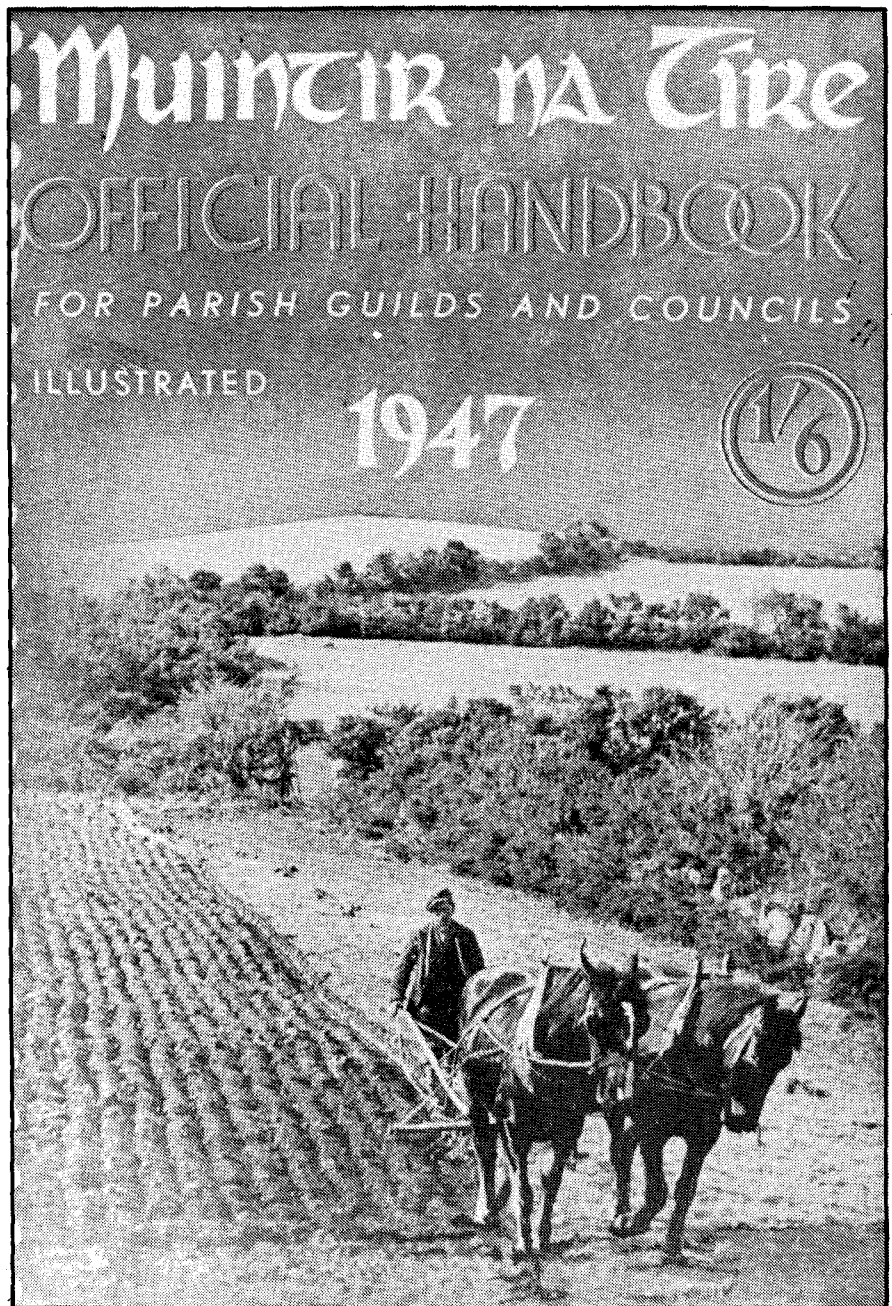
The proposed cheap fuel scheme, initiated by the city's Auxiliary Guild on 11 July, 1941, was to pose many problems of a practical nature for Muintir. The first and most basic of these was that of the unavailability of tea for the thirsty turf-cutters.

Muintir responded quickly by setting up a tea-depot at the Bedford Row Ice Rink, where Muintir supporters could hand in portions of the extremely scarce beverage. Secondly, the Limerick bogs proved too wet to work in 1941, so the turf had to be won from bogs in counties Cork and Kerry.

The outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease and the shortage of petrol made it necessary to contact the Department of Supplies to seek permission to import the turf from neighbouring counties.

By November, 1941, the guild's sub-committee realised that only about 3,000 tons of turf, costing £6,000, would be available, and consequently, those deemed eligible for the scheme would have to be restricted to old age pensioners, widows, and orphans, home assistance recipients and the unemployed. The secretary's reports for the 1941-'42 and 1942-'43 fuel schemes are fascinating social history documents.

From 25 September, 1941, £1, 838 was



*The official handbook of Muintir na Tire, 1947.*

collected in the penny-in-the-pound scheme, and a further £575 was received in the form of subscriptions, proceeds of dances, whist drives, gold competitions and a radio broadcast concert from St. John's Pavilion, Mulgrave Street.

A total of 1,777 tons of turf was purchased from suppliers in counties Kerry and Clare, and 120 tons were presented by S. Barker, Waterville, making a total of 1,897 tons received. Making an allowance for 10% in handling losses, this gave a nett total of 1,708 tons for issue to the poor.

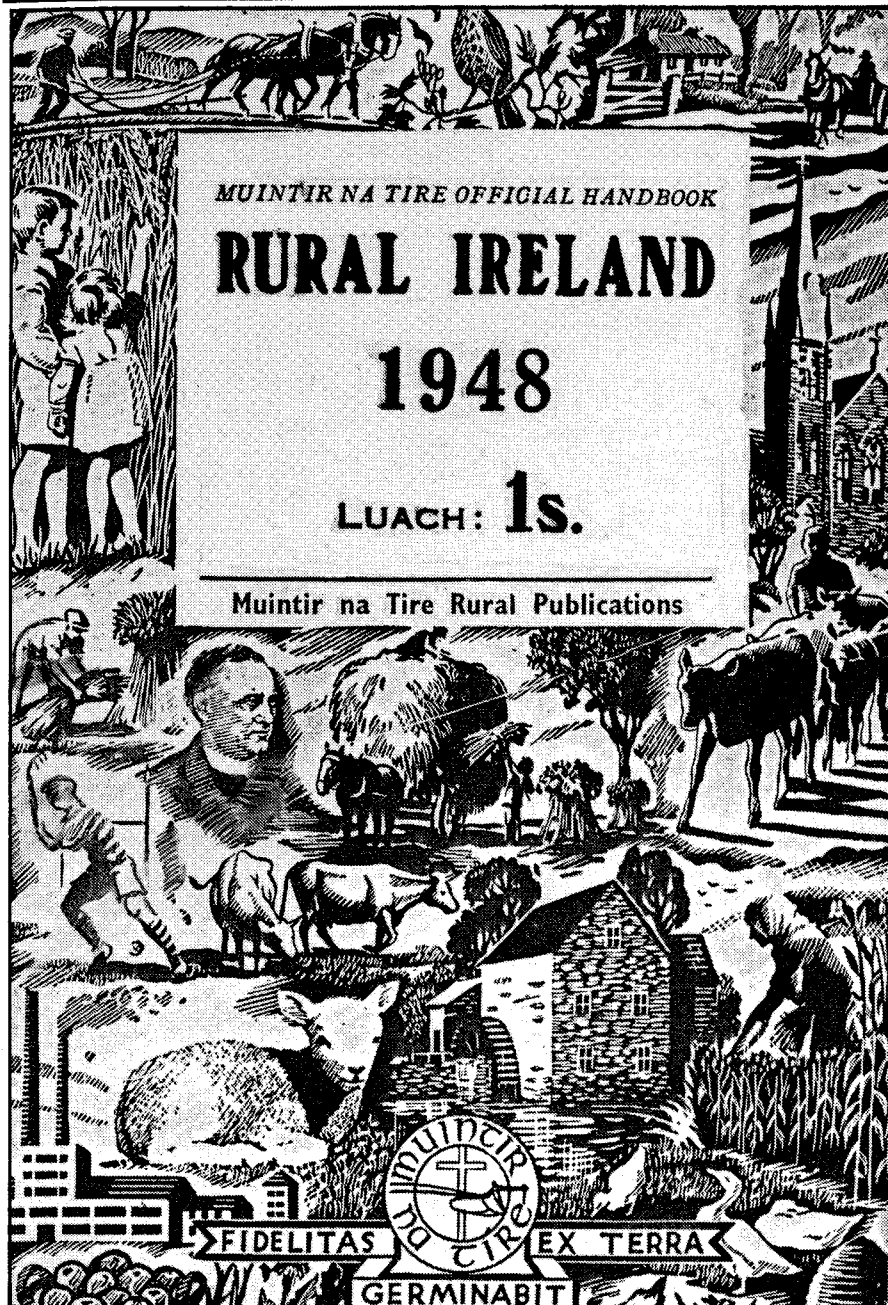
From 14 November, 1941, to 7 March, 1942, 32,825 lots, or approximately 1,333 tons of turf, were distributed to the poor, leaving 375 tons on hands. The turf was sold in 6 $\frac{1}{2}$  stone lots at 1/3 per stone, or 25/- per ton. (The normal price of turf in the city at that time was £3 per ton). In addition, at the close of the 1941-'42 scheme, 1,400 families each received 6 $\frac{1}{2}$

stone of turf, free of charge. Approximately 2,500 families in all benefited from this scheme. During this period, 12 men were employed, and up to the 7 March, 1942, the wages paid were £351.6s.8d. The hired-carters received £232.7s.4d. for cartage from the docks, and the dockers received £43.3s.6d. for loading the carts.<sup>(6)</sup>

### 1942-'43 FUEL SCHEME

The 1942-'43 scheme proved even more successful than that of the previous year. Total collections from the penny-in-the-pound, scheme contributions from the city's parish guilds and subscriptions amounted to £5,257.4s.9d. The purchase of turf and the cost of distribution etc. was £5,379.8s.0d. leaving a deficit at £122.3s.3d. This deficit was offset by a grant from the Minister for Local Government.

In all, 2,086 tons of turf were pur-



'Rural Ireland', 1948.

chased and from the period of 9 November, 1942, to 31 March, 1943, 37,000 lots of approximately 1 cwt of good, dry turf was issued at 1/- per lot to recipients, and 4,700 lots were issued free of charge to home assistance recipients. Therefore, a total of 41,700 lots of turf were issued to an average 2,000 families on a weekly basis.<sup>70</sup> The Auxiliary Guild was to continue this successful project until the 'Emergency' ended.

#### RURAL WEEK AND RECREATION

But perhaps the zenith in the Associate Guild's work during these years was its promotion of the 1942 'Rural Week' at Mungret College. This residential congress, which sat from 9 to 16 August, took the parish as its discussion theme. On Monday, 10 August, for example, Rev. E.T. Coyne presented a paper entitled 'The Parish as a Unit of Rural Organisation', while on Wednesday, 12

August, Michael Murphy, M.A., discussed 'The Parish on the Unit of Economic Planning'.<sup>81</sup>

Rural Weeks, however, were not solely confined to theorizing, and Mungret Rural Week in 1942 proved to be no exception in terms of recreational activities. As well as opera, quizzes and light-hearted discussions, participants were treated to the best of local drama. On Tuesday, 11 August, for example, a capacity audience watched the College Players present *The Fire Burns Late*, a three act play by the Limerick playwright, P.J. Fitzgibbon. The play's cast included local drama stalwarts such as Ita Gleeson and Kitty Bredin.

Outside of promoting the annual congress in 1942, the Auxiliary Guild provided much in the way of entertainment. Many 'Fireside Chats' were held at the Limerick headquarters at 8 The Crescent and at the Catholic Institute. 'Chats' were an amalgam of lectures,

debates, music and quizzes etc. On 22 March, 1942, at the Catholic Institute, a packed house listened to the following talks: 'What is our National Vice' by Rev. T. Hurley, S.J.; 'Why I Joined Muintir na Tire' by Mrs. K. O'Callaghan and 'More Dips into Limerick's Past' by Rev. M. Moloney P.P.

Limerick also had many other links with Muintir. Frank Lyddy, the owner of the Key Printing Works in William Street, was a close friend of Fr Hayes, and served as honorary national secretary of Muintir for many years. Some other well known people in the city and county, including many local teachers, were to be found among the often overlapping memberships of Muintir and the Knights of Columbanus.

A major study of Co. Limerick, and Muintir's most notable publication, *The Limerick Rural Survey 1958-1964*, edited by Rev. (later Bishop) Jeremiah Newman, was published in 1964. This valuable collection of essays is still widely read and quoted today.

But, for all the achievements of its various schemes and publications on rural and community development, and for all the efforts of many influential professional and farming people in these projects, how far did Muintir succeed in its original objectives? Tim Pat Coogan, in measuring this achievement concluded: '... it cannot be claimed that it (Muintir) has had any appreciable effect on emigration or economic development'.<sup>82</sup>

Given the economic realities of Irish rural life, this story could hardly have been different, particularly in the light of the structural changes in Irish agriculture in the last four decades. Muintir's role and work in Limerick City, including its efforts to relieve the grinding poverty, must be measured against this background.

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