

John Hayes (1887-1957)

Founder of Muintir na Tíre

Introduction

John Hayes is best remembered as the founder of Muintir na Tíre. In both its incarnations as a co-operative society and as a more broadly based rural renewal movement, Hayes's Muintir na Tíre is best seen as an attempt towards the reconstruction of community relations in post civil-war Ireland. Muintir na Tíre drew from a raft of conservative Catholic social thought and its failure to address differences between the propertied and non-propertied classes may also be seen as indicative of its social conservatism. Under Hayes's guidance Muintir na Tíre was opposed to excessive state control and abhorred class conflict. Initially constituted in 1931 as a co-operative society which failed to unite farmers and farm labourers, Muintir na Tíre decided in 1937 to use Guilds and Parish Councils in Catholic parishes to bring about rural renewal. From then until Hayes's death in 1957, Muintir na Tíre achieved a range of successes both at local and national level. As well as responding to the 'Emergency' the organisation was heavily involved in the Rural Electrification Scheme and in such activities as 'Rural Weeks.' This article examines the life of John Hayes. It traces his family background as well as his training as a priest. It examines Hayes's activities in England in the 1920s as well as his admiration for the Italian fascist leader Mussolini. The focus of the article is on the formative influences which may have shaped Hayes's thinking in the formation of Muintir na Tíre.

Family background

The Hayes family came originally from the townland of Ballyvoreen in County Limerick. In 1780, Daniel Hayes - John Hayes paternal great grandfather - moved from nearby Ballyvoreen to Moher. The family began the task of creating a homestead and working the land. By 1872, when his grandson Michael Hayes married Hanora McCormack from Madaboy, the family had a 49 acre farm, approximately 50% of which was unreclaimed land. Their farm was on the estate of Valentine Frederick Lawless, otherwise known as Lord Cloncurry. By the time they were evicted by Cloncurry in 1882, the couple had six children. Owing to a fall in agricultural prices in 1881, Cloncurry's tenants demanded a 20% reduction in rent. The landlord refused

by **Coim Devereux**

any reduction and subsequently writs were issued evicting 32 tenants, including the Hayes family.¹ Unlike his nearby neighbours, the Barringtons,² Lord Cloncurry was resolute in his refusal to assist the tenants and they were evicted by a team of 50 men led by Mr. Hobson, the sub-sheriff³ in April 1882. The local Land League moved quickly into action, erecting what we might now term pre-fabricated huts. According to Rynne:

"The huts were ... fairly solid. They consisted of sections of double sheeted timber, placed upright and bolted together, so that the huts could be erected in a very short time. The felt roof was tarred as soon as it was laid on. There was a small stove in the kitchen with a pipe through the roof."⁴

Although they were to prove helpful to their own tenants, in terms of a reduction of rent, the Barringtons refused to allow huts to be built on the land at Murroe. The Hayes family situated their Land League hut at Ballyvoreen on Terence



Dublin 24th July 1943-XXI

Dear Father Hayes,

I want to express to you my most sincere thanks for your kind letter of July 21st on the occasion of the bombing of Rome.

Your words of sympathy on such a sad occasion have touched me deeply for they find their origin in your comprehension of the greatness of the Eternal City - a greatness that never will be destroyed. It is indeed gratifying to find your admiration of the Duce is so sincere and so complete. You seem to understand his highly human and universal personality.

Thanking you again for your kind words, please believe me,

Yours sincerely

J. B. ...
Italian Minister

Rev. Father Hayes C.C.
The Presbitery
Tipperary

Letter to Fr. Hayes from the Italian Ambassador, Dublin, 1943.

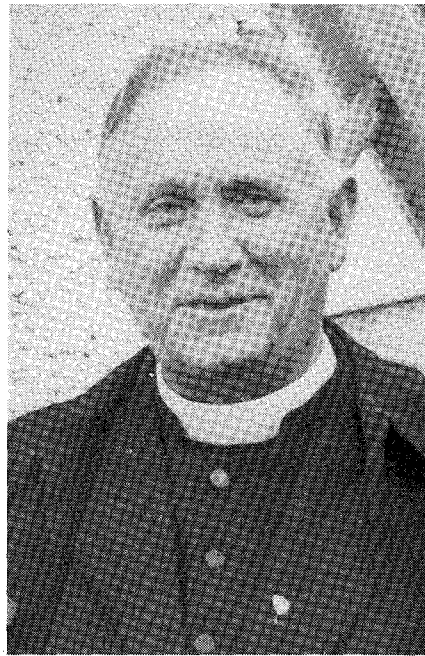
McCormack's land. The Hayes family were to live in this temporary accommodation for nearly 13 years until they returned to Moher in 1894.

During their time in the hut four more children were born to Michael and Hanorah Hayes, including their son John⁵ Martin, who was born on the 11th of November 1887 - St. Martin's Day. The living conditions in the hut were quite poor; diet, too, was frugal as endorsed by the fact that the younger children, including John, were affected by rickets. It is worthwhile speculating about other possible effects which this experience had on the Hayes children and on John in particular. For all of his adult life as leader of Muintir na Tire, John Hayes reminded all those who would listen that he was born in a Land League hut. The Land League demonstrated to Hayes the possibilities which a mass movement might have in rural Ireland. The memories of eviction and eventual land ownership might also go some way in explaining Hayes's conservatism about possible land redistribution. The experience was also significant for Hayes and his brother Mick in hardening their attitudes towards the British. Mick Hayes was to become a Republican organiser in the Murroe district, while John Hayes, although he rejected violence, was strongly nationalist in his outlook.

Schooling and studies for the priesthood

John Hayes received his early schooling at Murroe National School and for a time he also attended a classical school in Doon, which was run by the local curate. In September 1900, when Hayes was almost 13, he and his brother Mick started to attend the Crescent College in Limerick. The family paid £2 for the boys per term. The Hayes brothers travelled the 12 miles to Limerick mainly by jennet and cart and for a brief period by rail from the station in Boher, which was roughly 4 miles from Murroe.⁶ Hayes seems to have performed well at school and in his five years at the Crescent College he showed himself to be a prolific poet as well as being a keen nationalist. In his lunch breaks, and occasionally before he returned to Murroe in the evening time, he and his brother would visit the City Library in Glentworth Street to read the Sinn Féin paper, *The Irish People*, edited by Arthur Griffith.

Hayes completed his studies at Crescent College in 1905 and in the autumn of that year he began studying for the priesthood at St. Patrick's College, Thurles. As a result of its tough regime, he spent two unhappy years at Thurles and in 1907 he secured a free place at the Irish College in Paris. His time in Paris was well spent and Hayes not only learnt to read French, but he began to become aware of attempts by both French and Belgian Catholic organisations to bring farmers together on co-operative lines. He also immersed himself in Catholic social thinking, best exemplified by the (1891) papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.



Fr. John Hayes.

Photo: Justin Neeson.

Liverpool

John Hayes was ordained in 1913 and, following temporary placements in Meath and Wexford, the young priest was sent to Liverpool in 1915.⁷ The importance of his first real posting as a priest in Liverpool lie in his efforts at organising youth activities and seeing first hand the slum conditions in which so many of the emigrant Irish lived.

The young Fr. Hayes was also to make the English national newspapers in 1920. Upwards of 150 Irish Republican prisoners were being held in Wormwood Scrubbs in London, including among them Hayes's brother Mick. As the prisoners went on hunger-strike, Fr. Hayes was anxiously to visit his brother. In spite of eventually receiving a permit, he was forbidden to see him.

Hayes decided to enliven a protest outside of Wormwood Scrubbs Jail with speeches and the rosary in support of the Irish prisoners. The protesters were attacked by an Orange mob while police refused to intervene. *The Daily Mail*⁸ described the "extraordinary scenes at Scrubbs ... in the midst of all this a priest (Fr. Hayes) calmly recited the Rosary."

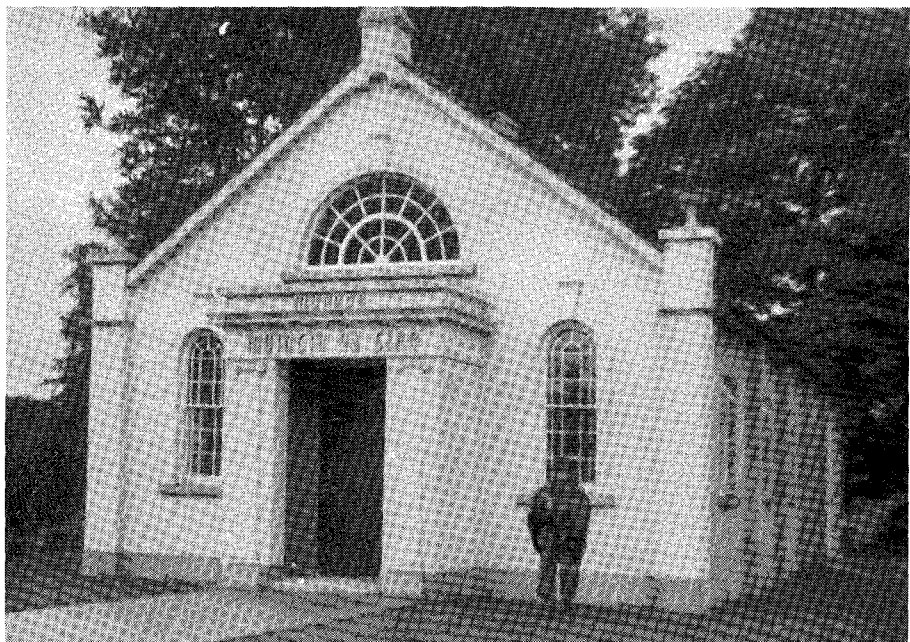
Hayes's experience in the slum conditions of urban industrial Britain was an important factor in the development of his thinking about rural Ireland. It certainly convinced him that something needed to be done to halt rural decline and to reduce the level of emigration, particularly of younger people. His experience in Liverpool also goes some way towards explaining the strong anti-urban⁹ dimension in the ideas developed by Hayes and Muintir na Tire.

Meeting Mussolini

In 1924, Fr. Hayes was recalled to Ireland to serve as chaplain to the Mercy Sisters at Templemore, County Tipperary. He then served as curate in Ballybricken, County Limerick and in Castleiny, County Tipperary. While working in both parishes he began to devote more attention towards developing an organisation which might improve conditions in rural Ireland. Although he toyed with many ideas at this time, the first concrete evidence of his interest in rural development was his involvement as chairman of the Castleiny Graingrowers Association.

In 1930, Fr. Hayes was invited to give sermons during Advent at San Silvestro - the Pallottine House of Studies in Rome. Hayes managed to meet not only the Pope, but also secured an audience with the Italian fascist leader Mussolini, a man whom Hayes greatly admired.

Hayes received permission to meet Mussolini through the British Ambassador in Rome. In later years, Hayes was to recall his meeting with the



Muintir na Tire Hall, Murroe.

Limerick Museum.



Eviction scene, 1880.

fascist leader with fond memories. He recalled:

*"he grasped my hand and placing the other hand on my shoulder, he said 'Buenvento' as he conducted me towards the table with one hand holding mine and the other on my shoulder. I felt at home at once, and in the presence of a great friend, and although I cannot speak Italian I was emboldened to reply 'Grazie Eccellenza'. Then in English I said 'You speak English, Your Excellency?' He replied 'a little', but that little was much - it surprised me. I continued 'We in Ireland love and admire what you have done in Italy, and I pray for you.'"*¹⁰

Hayes proceeded to explain to Mussolini the problems facing post-revolutionary Ireland as well as the activities of the Castleiny Graingrowers Association. Fr. Hayes then asked Mussolini to autograph a series of photographs of Il Duce. His own, upon which Mussolini wrote 'Al Reverendo J.M. Hayes ... Cordialiter', was to become a treasured possession and was subsequently shown to all visitors to Hayes's homes over the remaining years of his life.

Hayes admiration for Mussolini was to continue despite the fact that the excesses of fascism were becoming more widely known. As the reply to Fr. Hayes's letter to the Italian Ambassador in Dublin in 1943 on the bombing of Rome demonstrates, he still held Mussolini in high regard. The Ambassador wrote "It is indeed gratifying to find your admiration of Duce is so sincere and so complete. You seem to understand his highly human and universal personality."¹¹

Apart from the more obvious reasons why Hayes's respect for Mussolini should be questioned is the contradiction in the fact that Hayes and Muintir na Tíre were, in theory at least, opposed to what they saw as state encroachment into people's

lives. Mussolini's own actions in this regard ran contrary to Hayes's philosophy. Still, the Roman Catholic Church had reached an accommodation with Mussolini, so why not Muintir na Tíre. In spite of Hayes's pronouncements about party politics at home, he was himself quite partisan in his outlook. Although Muintir na Tíre's founder had attempted to ban party politics from the fireside chat discussions during rural weeks, he was himself adept at seeking support from political leaders. He seems to have had a particular affinity for De Valera and corresponded regularly with him seeking financial support for Muintir na Tíre, as well as indicating his own personal support for the leader of Fianna Fáil.¹²

Conclusion

John Hayes was an important figure in the Irish Catholic social movement. His work represents one of the best examples of an attempt to put Catholic social teaching into practice. Under Hayes's leadership, Muintir na Tíre had mixed fortunes. Although he was a charismatic figure well capable of encouraging local people to set up their own Muintir na Tíre guilds, he was a poor organiser and lacked a coherent plan to develop the overall organisation. The movement's work under Hayes must be seen as part of a larger attempt by the Catholic Right in Ireland to control social activities and from their perspective, to 'save' Ireland from Communism and modernisation. Muintir na Tíre under the guidance of Fr. Hayes achieved much at local parish level, yet many of its efforts were overshadowed by larger structural changes which were already taking place in rural Ireland. The practice of community development as defined by Muintir na Tíre drew upon a consensus approach, which in practice often failed to materialise. As with its predecessor, Muintir na Tíre Limited, at parish level Muintir na Tíre's activities

were affected by conflict between class and other interest groups. Muintir na Tíre's failure to address differences between propertied and non-propertied classes may be seen as indicative of its social conservatism. It also meant that the kind of rural Ireland that they were intent on saving (if it ever actually existed in the first place) was not to be for everybody, as the social and economic system which they failed to question was a significant causal factor in the change and decline of rural Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s.

NOTES

1. See, for example, the coverage of the evictions in *The Limerick Reporter and Tipperary Vindicator*, 18/4/1882.
2. See, for example, Donal Ryan's account of how the Barrington's treated their tenants in *The Old Limerick Journal*, Barrington's Edition, No. 24, Winter 1988, pp. 63-67.
3. The eviction team included Mr. Hobson, Sub-Sheriff; Mr. C.H. Fitt, City Sheriff, 4 mounted constabulary; 15 emergency bailiffs; 28 armed policemen under Head Constable Burbage and Sir Henry Goodriche RM.
4. Stephen Rynne (1960) *Father John Hayes*, Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds pp. 24.
5. An earlier child also called John had died in infancy.
6. Changes in the timetabling of the Tipperary to Limerick train meant that it was no longer feasible to do this after November 1901. See *The Records of the Irish Railway Record Society*, Heuston Station, Dublin.
7. Skehan (1993) lists Hayes's appointments as a priest as follows - Temporary Mission, Kilbeg, Meath from August 1913 to summer 1915; Temporary Mission in House of Missions, Wexford late summer, 1915; Mount Carmel, Liverpool, Autumn 1915 to March 1924; chaplain, Templemore April 1924 to March 1925; curate, Ballybricken until February 1927; curate, Castleiny from February 1927 to March 1934; curate, Tipperary from March 1934 to May 1946 and Parish Priest of Bansa from May 1946 until his death in 1957. See Walter Skehan (1993) *Cashel and Emly Heritage*, Holycross: Abbey Books.
8. *The Daily Mail*, November 1920. Cited in Fr. John Hayes (1952) 'More Memories' in *The Fireside Chat*. Muintir na Tíre Publications, Tipperary.
9. See, for example Eoin Devereux (1991) 'Saving Rural Ireland: Muintir na Tíre and its Anti-Urbanism, 1931-1958.' *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, December 17 No. 2.
10. Stephen Rynne (1960) *Father John Hayes*, Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds pp. 99.
11. Hayes's Personal File, Muintir na Tíre, Tipperary.
12. There is an abundance of Hayes to De Valera correspondence in the *Taoiseach's File No. S 10816* National Archives, Dublin.