John Hayes (1887-1957) 
Founder of Muintir na Tire

Introduction

J
ohn Hayes is best remembered as the founder of Muintir na Tire. In both its incarnations as a co-operative society and as a more broadly based rural renewal movement, Hayes's Muintir na Tire is best seen as an attempt towards the reconstruction of community relations in post-civil-war Ireland. Muintir na Tire 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 Tire 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 Tire 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 Tire 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 Tire.

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 any reduction and subsequently writs were issued evicting 32 tenants, including the Hayes family. Unlike his nearby neighbours, the Barringtons, 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-sheriff in April 1882. The local Land League moved quickly into action, erecting what we might now term pre-fabricated huts. According to Rynne:

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 Duke 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,

Rey. Father Hayes C.C.
The Presbytery
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 Hannah Hayes, including their son John, 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 provisioning 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 £22 for the boys per term. The Hayes family 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. 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 Glenworth 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, beat exemplified by the (1891) papal encyclical Rerum Novarum.

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 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-urban 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 Grain Growers Association.

In 1930, Fr. Hayes was invited to give sermons during Advent at San Silvestro - the Pallotine 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
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 'C' grazie e basta'. 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.'"

Hayes proceeded to explain to Mussolini the problems facing post-revolutionary Ireland as well as the activities of the Castlery Graingrowers Association. Fr. Hayes then asked Mussolini to autograph a series of photographs of II Duce. His own, upon which Mussolini wrote 'Al Reverendo J.M. Hayes ... Cordialiter', was to become a treasured possession and was often failed to materialise. As with its predecessor, Muintir na Tire Limited, at parish level Muintir na Tire's activities were affected by conflict between class and other interest groups. Muintir na Tire's failure to achieve consensus approach, which in practice often failed to materialise. As with its predecessor, Muintir na Tire Limited, at parish level Muintir na Tire's activities 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, 18/12/1882.
3. The eviction team included Mr. Hobson, Sub-Sheriff; Mr. C.H. Fitz, City Sheriff, 4 mounted constabulary; 15 emergency bailiffs; 28 armed police-men under Head Constable Burbage and Sir Henry Goodriche RM.
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.
11. Hayes's Personal File, Muintir na Tire, Tipperary.