

No. 109—AENEAS FENTON of Ardpatrik

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WE delve deep into the misty past to recall the memory of Aeneas Fenton, and some of the other great men of Ardpatrik, who made the athletic welkin ring in the long dead days when that area of South Limerick was the home and breeding ground of more world beaters in athletics than the whole round of the globe could, or did, produce. And it is an undoubted fact that many though they were whose fame spread to distant lands, there were as many more who rarely ventured into the arena, and who were worthy compeers of those who focussed the eyes of the nations on the athletic pre-eminence of Limerick some three score years ago.

FROM THE LATE P. J. REA.

No greater authority on the olden renown of that historic district could be found than the late P. J. Rea, and we learn from him of the athletic awakenings in Ardpatrik.

Some years after the famine had left its watermark upon the hardy folk that survived that dreadful period in our history, two brothers bearing the name of Fitzgerald decorated the hill of Ardpatrik with three standing jumps—flat monuments to their prowess, dexterity, and physical fitness. The Fitzgeralds were equally fond of farming pursuits and, in their spare time, found time to follow the hounds and carry a "drag" or throw a sledge over high walls and temporary constructed battlements. They vied with each other in throwing a "sliotar," a species of hand-made ball, into the cool, calm evening air, and were pretty equal in all friendly rivalries, and, like the celebrated Maddens of Rathkeale and Glenbrohane, they competed against "each other" and "one another," and this was occasioned by the age limit between them—one year and three months—not much to be spoken of in the spacious field of athletics. They made good on the hill of the national apostle, and defied the best that then existed.

It was in 1875 that a young man heard of the great record of the Fitzgeralds, and he being of the fibre that good men are made of, moral stamina, physical structure, with component parts suitably administered to his avoirdupois weight, made up his mind to study the jumps and try them. I refer to that fine specimen of humanity, William Whyte O'Dwyer of Pahanasoodry. The "Faha," as he was nick-named, in addition to his studies found time for a jump or a wrestle or a cross-country spin "o'er hill and dale" with the Meddens, the Wallaces, the Howards and the Duggans. On a lovely Sunday evening a horse-drawn landau saw William on the hill of the saints, and, with a cut pants and a bawneen, made several unsuccessful attempts to lower the immortal records of the Fitzgeralds.

TRIUMVIRATE OF GIANTS.

It was about this time, also he came in touch with Tom Howard of Ballintubber and Jim Connell of Ardpatrik. The justly celebrated John Moore of Darragh, who attempted the jumping of the bridge, joined up with the triumvirate of giants, and for the first time Harry Tracey was discovered with Mick Ryan, the Pindar, all herculean young men, who lived up to the requirements of the old headline—a healthy body with a mind at ease. They were augmented by the "Buck" Fentons, a fierce, forceful and formidable pair of men, who could use the bouthane or saddle stirrup with the cultural ability of an old Cromwellian trooper, and thereby began the famous battles of the "Coarse Fields," the "Well of Malua" and the "Cross of the Tree."

The most acute critic could not wish to see a grander or more powerful body of men. They ran, jumped and played for their club colours or for the honour

of their respective parishes, and as long as the coveted prize was won on its honest merit, the defeated entrant was pleased, inasmuch as he took his defeat like a man.

Up to 1864 the united parishes worked for the general welfare of the youth of the country, then American pioneers after the civil war returned to Ireland and commenced recruiting for the Irish Fenian Brotherhood. The ball was locked away for a time, as during another glorious period in later years, and in its stead came the rifle and the cartridge. The Fenian Rising ended in disaster, and it was not until 1875 that athletics again found a place in the national life, and the old shelves were ransacked for the jersey and the running shoe.

KILFINANE AND DISTRICT.

From the "Coarse Fields" the venue changed to Tobin's Field, near the old mill, and there in the summer of 1885 it can be truly averred that the star of athletic sports rose high in the heavens of the infant G.A.A. The town and district around Kilfinane brought forth paragons of speed and dexterity—men who can be looked upon as the very hectors of heroism. Dr. Ned Walsh, one of the best all-round athletes of his day; Roger and Aeneas Fenton, Tim Ryan, Tom, James and Michael Walsh, Jackey and David O'Connell, Pat Lillis, Nicholas Dwane, all in a short time jumped into notoriety, to put the name of Ardpatrik high up on the list even against the great men of their era—many of them world-beaters in after years.

Aeneas Fenton was a man of fine physique, standing well over six feet, and was the third son of the late John Fenton, farmer at the Cross of Ardpatrik. As a mere schoolboy, then sixteen and a half years, he could pitch "slabs" or quarry stones as he would marbles, and being a class mate of such figures as Ned Walsh, Nicholas Dwane, Pat Lillis and Tim Ryan, the physical prowess became more progressive than the educational, for Walsh got the pack well under control—Dwane all high jumping, Lillis long distance foot racing and "Goliath" Fenton the weights.

His elder brother, Rodger, was a 56 lbs. man and a fiery fellow at putting from the shoulder. Aeneas kept well away at the 28 lbs. and 42 lbs. At all small "meets," and they were many around the locality (under no rules) Aeneas put these weights and faced all antagonists. On Sundays principally he figured at these improvised gatherings and was the wonder of the years from 1880 to 1885. After that he went to America and it is said that he turned professional there. He began the 56 lbs. in Manhattan and won at such places as Coney Island, New York Grounds, Bronx and elsewhere. Few records of his doings across the Atlantic are available, and more's the pity, for he was a powerful man and it is fairly certain that his performances were above the standard of the American arena at the time.

Old schoolmates, who slowly, steadily, relentlessly, are passing on, tell how Fenton had a mania for pitching every stone on his pathway between his home and school, or from the cross to Sunville, and on his return would resume the occupation.

BACK ON THE TRACK AT HOME.

How long he remained in America it is impossible now to discover, but he was back on the athletic track in his native land in 1893, and competed at Kilfinane Sports on June 1st in that year. He was scratch man in both weight events and gained second place in each—his figures being 56 lbs. between legs, 26 ft. 9½ ins.; putting 28 lbs., 30 ft. 10 ins. Larry Roche beat him by half-an-inch in the latter event, and Fenton beat Roche half-an-inch in the 56 lbs.

Some great men were pitching the weights around this period in Limerick, including the re-

nowned John Flanagan, of Kilbreedy, and his brother, Tom; R. Smith, also of Kilbreedy; W. K. Martin, of Galbally; J. R. Hayes, who, too, hailed from Galbally; Denis Carey, Kilfinane; and another Kilfinane star, William Conery.

Aeneas sailed away from Ireland again at the end of this season, his destination this time Australia, where he flourished for many a day and delighted to meet any lover of athletics with whom he discussed the days gone by with pardonable pride.

Mention has been made of Nicholas Dwane and it is only fair to his memory to say that he was a high jumper of outstanding merit, with a style peculiarly his own. He "took off" his right leg, and assumed a horizontal position when crossing the bar, and with an acrobatic swing of his left leg levered his body free when getting across, the entire effort being most graceful to behold. He could manage six feet without any special preparation, and, though seldom seen in the competitive arena, yet on the four occasions he came out he won, and that in very good company.

THE CAREER OF TIM RYAN.

Before passing from Ardpatrik, some reference is necessary to the career of Tim Ryan, who was a pole jumper of much ability and won prizes also in the high and long jumps and with the light weights. A story is told that on one occasion in an athletic contest his pole broke and went into his side, necessitating ten stitches, and on exactly that day twelve months he commemorated the event by winning again in his favourite event. Tim Ryan won 2 all-Ireland titles in the pole jump—in 1894, under the I.A.A.A. rules, at 10 ft. 4 ins., and the following year, under G.A.A. laws, on a holding sod at 9 feet 6 inches.

His first recorded victory was at Nenagh on August 3rd 1893, when he won the pole jump at 9 ft. On September 14th that year at Adare, he was second in the long jump to Larry Roche at 19 ft. 0½ ins.

He had two seconds at the Limerick, R.I.C. Sports on July 10th, 1894—the high jump at 5 ft. 4 ins. and the long jump at 20 ft. 9 ins. John Flanagan won the latter event with 21ft. 5 ins. Larry Roche was third. At Nenagh G.A.A. meeting on August 9th he won the pole jump at 8 ft. 9 ins.

Tim Ryan's 1895 successes included the winning of the long jump (22 feet), at Limerick A.A. and B.C. Sports at the Markets Field, with Paddy ("Dockty") McNamara, 2nd, and a second place (5 ft. 5 ins.) in the high jump at the same meeting.

He had a field day at Nenagh on July 17th, winning the high jump at 5 ft. 4 ins. and collecting three seconds—the 7 lbs. weight (79 ft. 11 ins.); the pole jump and the long jump. On August 5th, at Clonmel Sports he tied with J. Blackburn, of Galbally, for first place, at 9 ft. 6 ins. in the pole vault.

His only recorded win in 1896 was at the L.A.A. and B.C. meeting on June 3rd, but it was a notable one in that he beat the renowned Paddy Leahy in the high jump, the result being: Tim Ryan (3 ins.), 5 ft. 4 ins.; Paddy Leahy (scratch), 5 ft. 3 ins.

Back on familiar ground at Nenagh on July 20th, 1897, he had a very successful evening, winning the high jump at 5 ft. 1½ ins. And being second in the pole jump (9 ft. 4 ins.); the long jump (19 ft. 7 ins.) and the running hop, step and jump (40 feet).

1898 completed his term on the athletic field, and that year he was second in putting the 16 lbs. shot at Limerick R.I.C. Sports on July 18th, and finished up at Ennis on August 28th, by winning the 120 yards hurdles and filling second place in the long jump.

And so we bid farewell to the great men who, in other days kept the name of Ardpatrik high in the athletic history of Limerick. Their deeds deserve remembrance.