

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 81—PADDY FLAHERTY of Rathkeale

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THE name Paddy Flaherty stands for something more than good whiskey. In Limerick, anyway, and through the length and breadth of Munster for many years, it recalled one of the best hurlers to wear the Shannonside colours—a representative that Rathkeale will boast of with justifiable pride as long as a solitary old soldier remains of the thousands who thrilled at his doings on a Limerick team that might be termed the real hard luck side of all those down the long seasons who have battled unsuccessfully for All-Ireland renown.

It may safely be said that no district in County Limerick can boast of a longer standing in the realms of the G.A.A. than Rathkeale, that little town nestling on the banks of the rippling Deel. Long before the great revival by the famed Archbishop Croke, Maurice Davin and Michael Cusack, the old form of "goaling," as it was then termed, was carried on all over the town and neighbouring districts. The ball used in those far-off days was an ordinary twine-heart covered with sheepskin, and the form of caman used was an ordinary branch of ask, hazel or whitethorn, something similar to a hockey stick and called by old Gaels a "graffawn," probably so named from its resemblance to a graffawn, which was a bent or hooked stick for the grubbing of furze, brushwood, etc., then largely used all over the country by the peasantry for the reclaiming of their lands. The back streets and bye-ways of the town used to be the practice grounds in those good old days, and remain so to some extent even to-day, for despite a splendid pitch now on the outskirts of the town it is nothing unusual to see the young active lads having an odd puck or two on the old historic pitches.

READY RESPONSE TO CLARION CALL.

The Thurles clarion call met a ready response from Rathkeale, and the first regular club formed in the parish under G.A.A. auspices had as President James Blackwell, with Harry Blackwell as Secretary, and leading members in J. M. O'Grady, John Ambrose and William Ward.

Tournaments were soon the fashion everywhere, and as early as 1888 we find the Rathkeale boys figuring in the final of one of these, organised in Askeaton for both senior and junior clubs of Limerick County. The premier trophy—a set of splendid gold medals—was won by the famous South Liberties, whilst Rathkeale annexed the Silver Cup for supremacy in the junior grade.

Success followed success as the years went by, and we find them capturing another silver cup at Newcastle West, the defeated finalists being Croom, then led by a man immortalised in the history of the Limerick G.A.A.—Denis Spencer Lyons of Croom Castle. In the Ardagh Silver Cup Tournament decided they also won, this time against a fine Monegaw combination—led by the late William Hough, father of another great hurler and now Munster Council Treasurer, Willie Hough.

HOME AND HOME MATCHES.

Home and home matches were then very much in vogue, and we find mention of many meetings between Rathkeale and clubs like Bruff, Caherline, Ballingarry and Kilfinane with Rathkeale emerging from the majority victorious. In 1897 shortly before Kilfinane selection won the All-Ireland, Rathkeale played the Kilfinane boys at Ballygran in the county championship and were only beaten by what was then known as a forfeit point. Shortly after this Rathkeale faded from the picture a bit, being weakened by emigration, several of the lads crossing the Atlantic and making their home in the land of the Stars and Stripes.

Before leaving this great era, however, the names of members of the team will be read with interest:—Jimmie Kelly, captain; Wm. Sheahan, vice-captain; Wm. Heffernan, goal-keeper; Wm. Dowling, Con Donoghue, Tom Condon, Thomas Donoghue, Thomas Quin, Jer. Sheahan, Dick Keating, M. Hanrahan, John Donoghue, Denny Hayes, John McKnight, John Frawley, Denis Kelly, James Markham, Paddy Fitzgerald, Thomas Glenny, John Keating, Michael Guiry, Wm. Goodwin, Thomas Markham, Jim Hanrahan, and Johnny Connors.

SECOND GREAT CYCLE.

The second great cycle of Rathkeale hurling renown came with the turn of the century, when the

dying embers were fanned by Bill Sheahan, who in very quick time, ably assisted by Mick Madigan, Ned Kennedy, Gerald Scully, Pat and Eddie Flaherty, got the old club back to the top place. In a short time they were figuring in the 1900 County final against Castleconnell, and were there again five years later to contest the issue with Caherline.

In one season, Rathkeale had two great tournament successes—winning out at Ballingarry and in a competition promoted by their own Club. Perhaps their greatest rivals during this spell were Ballygran and it is on record that the teams played each other on eight occasions between 1904 and 1910. Ballygran fielded many of the great athletes of the county in those memorable matches, including Larry Roche, J. J. Bresnihan, and the Leahys—Joe, Mick and Tom. Mick Clifford was their captain.

In 1906, on the invitation of Austin Stack, Dick Fitzgerald and Kerry County Board Secretary, J. Moran, the Rathkeale hurlers played Kerry selected, at Tralee, in aid of the Catholic Church in Listowel, Rathkeale annexing a beautiful silver cup.

The Rathkeale Club at this period was known as the "William Abraham Hurling Club," called after the M.P. for West Limerick at the period—Mr. William Abraham. No team in West Limerick won more prizes such as medals, watches and jerseys, than the "Abrahams"—mostly won in local tournaments, a regular feature of the season then.

PADDY FLAHERTY.

Paddy Flaherty's association with the G.A.A. dates back to 1898. At the age of seventeen he played his first match with the Rathkeale senior string and for twenty years continued in the Deelside colours to become the pride of the West and one of the best hurlers that Rathkeale ever produced.

In 1904 the County selectors recognised his worth and he was selected on the Limerick team that played Kerry in a Munster Championship tie at Tralee. He was an immediate success and for many seasons continued a stalwart in the Limerick colours, figuring in several stirring contests that aroused remarkable enthusiasm by the Shannon and set the standard that in later years brought hurling in Limerick to such a high plane.

Paddy opened his inter-county career in the "top of the left" berth, and it is a tribute to his versatility that he proved a success in this position. However, he soon found his true place as right wing back, for which his natural turn for defence, allied to great striking power, amply fitted him. Flaherty's fame as a back soon became widespread, and he covered himself with glory in clashes with some of the greatest scoring men the grand old game of hurling has known.

FIGURED IN THE GOLDEN ERA.

He might be said to have figured during the golden era of our national pastime, as far as great scoring men in the old tradition goes, and it is enough to say that he came through with flying colours against famous players whose names will ever be held in reverence by the school of hurling fans. All the glamour of the past is recalled by mention of their names—Tom Semple and Hugh Shelly of Tipperary; Willie Mackessy, Tom Irwin and Jamesy Kelleher of Cork; the Doyles and Graces of Kilkenny; Hurley, the Kerry "scoring machine"; Fred Kelly and Amby Power of Clare. They were hurling giants all, and it is something to retell with pride that our own Paddy Flaherty of Rathkeale held his own with the best of them.

Paddy figured with the Young Ireland selection that contested the final of the famed Croke Fennelly Cup, one of the most valuable trophies ever fought for on Gaelic Fields. Played at Fethard on Sept. 12th, 1909, the game was a great battle for supremacy between two splendid teams and resulted in a narrow win for the Tipperary "pick": Thurles Blues, 1-11; Young Ireland, 1-7. The Limerick players were: J. Creamer (captain), J. Raels, M. Raels, P. Frawley, T. O'Brien, J. Flanagan, T. Hayes, M. Feely, T. Griffin, T. Mangan, J. Scanlan, J. Scully, P. Flaherty, J. Carroll, P. Herbert, E. Treacy.

The strides the G.A.A. have made in two score years is illustrated by the fact that when Limerick and Cork met in the Munster final of 1910 at Tralee, the gate receipts of £58 were considered very satisfactory. Last year, at Limerick Gaelic Grounds Munster final "takings" were £6,595 1s. 9d.

The defeat of Cork, at Tralee,

was one of the big surprises of its time. Cork were strongly fancied for All-Ireland honours that year and their defeat by Limerick was most unexpected, and came as a shock to all followers of hurling. The Cork players, too, were cocksure of victory and one of them, Willie Mackessy, said after the game: "We left the 'All Ireland' fall off our hurleys."

IN RARE FORM.

The Limerick men were in rare form that day, and were more than a match for the Rebel County side. They fought with great determination, their hurling was magnificent, their combination excellent, and their long and well delivered shots were more than Cork could withstand. In the opening half, Limerick set a terrific pace and at the interval were leading by three goals. In the second half, Cork hurled better and their supporters were hopeful they could win. However, Limerick maintained their earlier power and verve and the tussle for victory was magnificent in its fierceness. Cork put everything they knew into the fight for scores but the defence of Flaherty, O'Brien and Hayes was superb, and full-time found Limerick successful—Limerick, 5-1; Cork, 4-2. The Shannonside players were—J. Bourke, goal (Boher); M. Fealy, T. Mangan, M. Mangan (Croom), J. Harrington, E. Treacy, E. Clancy, C. Scanlan (Fedamore), T. Hayes, T. O'Brien (Young Ireland), J. Madden (Commercials), P. Flaherty (Rathkeale), J. Mackey, captain; S. Carroll, M. Danaher, D. Conway, M. Sweeney (Castleconnell).

AFTERWARDS AN ILL-FATED COMBINATION.

Limerick were considered by many as lucky to come through that great final victorious, but if they had any luck at Tralee they certainly left it there. They were an ill-fated combination afterwards. Winners of Munster Championship honours in 1910 and 1911, they were dogged with a misfortune that whipped All-Ireland honours from their very grasp. Two years running to lose under amazing circumstances would be enough to smash any combination, but the grit of the Limerick men of that day is reflected in their great victory over a grand Kilkenny team, then in their heyday, after a hectic struggle at Jones' Road on July 27th, 1913. The trophy was the prized "Cardinal's medals," presented by Cardinal Agliardi, and the Shannonside victory was hailed with delight in every Munster hamlet. That Nore-side team won seven All-Ireland victories in ten years—a performance we may never see repeated—and Limerick beat them in the height of their glory.

Another notable achievement for Paddy Flaherty was his selection with "Tyler" Mackey as the only two Limerickmen on a star-studded Munster hurling fifteen that figured in a great inter-provincial clash in Carrick-on-Suir in 1908.

Thirty-six golden years ago Paddy donned the green and white for the last time, but his retirement from the active arena did not, however, mean the severance of his connection with the G.A.A. For many years he continued as a referee of no mean ability and he "handled" several memorable games in days when the Limerick Championship in the premier grade was a real "needle" affair.

LOVER OF COURSING.

Like many another good Gael, next to his love for hurling came his liking for coursing, and Paddy Flaherty owned many good dogs, including "Myra's Fancy," runner-up for the Irish Cup some years ago.

Living within a "stone's throw" of the Rathkeale Gaelic Grounds, Paddy played a man's part in securing and holding that venue for our Gaelic games, and with the two grand old veterans, Bill Sheahan and M. Madigan, has always kept the G.A.A. flag proudly floating in that grand Western stronghold.

Let me conclude by quoting from a popular ballad by his co-worker, Mick Madigan:—

"By that field lives Paddy Flaherty
In his fine and stately home,
Whose name is now a household word,
No matter where Gaels roam;
He kept our colours flying
And imbued young blood around
By the balls he stopped and goals he scored

On Rathkeale Athletic Ground."
Long may you flourish, Paddy, is my parting wish to one who gave of his best to the G.A.A. in days when it was not so easy as it is now to do so.

No. 82—Laurence McNamara of Mount Pleasant.