

Forgotten civic hero may yet be honoured

By PATRICIA FEEHILY

THE daughter of one of the bravest public representatives that Limerick has ever known was hoping this week that moves to honour her father over 40 years after his death would at last be realised in her own lifetime.

Mai Birkhead, 86, who lives with her son, Jack Hennessy, and his wife at Castleconnell, is the daughter of former Mayor, councillor and alderman, James M Casey, the man who stepped into the breach after the murder of Mayor George Clancy and ex-Mayor, Michael O'Callaghan in 1921.

He took over as civic head of the city and arranged a public funeral for the murdered mayors and Volunteer Joseph O'Donoghue, in defiance of the orders of the British forces.

Despite being warned by Crown forces that there was to be no oration at the graveside, the Deputy Mayor, surrounded by British bayonets, delivered the oration himself, condemning the appalling murders.

Mr Casey, who was Mayor of Limerick from 1934 to 1936, died in 1953, but has never had a street nor a park in the city named after him.

He became the forgotten hero of Limerick public life, while other former mayors are remembered in nameplates all over the city.

Now moves are afoot, led by Deputy Jim Kemmy, to have the former Mayor honoured before next year's celebration of the 800th anniversary of the city's charter.

Deputy Kemmy told the Limerick Leader that there is agreement with management and the party leaders on the Council for a memorial within six months.

Mrs Birkhead recalls clearly the tensions of the time, when her late father risked his life to honour Limerick's martyred mayors.

"We were all very much afraid then, although we were also very proud of him," she recalled. "He was a lovely quiet man who

would do anything for anyone."

She was living then in Bowman Street with her father, mother, Emily, and sister, Eileen.

Her father, a master printer, was especially concerned about the poor of Limerick, and devoted his life to bettering their lot.

Over a decade afterwards, when Cllr Casey had become Mayor of Limerick, she remembers going down the Shannon with him, for the traditional casting of the spear claiming territorial rights of the estuary.

"It would be nice," she said, "to see him honoured now."

When Mrs Birkhead's first husband, Jim Hennessy, died, she moved to Yorkshire and married Charles Birkhead, also deceased.

Her son, Jack, who lived for some time in California, said that the family had been fighting for recognition for his grandfather for a long time.

"We have no idea why it has taken so long," he said.

A silver spade presented to his grandfather at the opening of the Killalee housing estate was donated by the family to the City museum.

Mr Casey, a Labour alderman and councillor, was also a noted amateur boxer, and became national president of the IABU. He was also active in the trades union movement, and became president of the Limerick Trades Council.

When he died in 1953, the Limerick Leader paid tribute to him as the man who had "stepped fearlessly into the gap of danger in a time of grave peril."

"Identified with the public life of his native city for close on half a century, he was one of the best known and most respected of men. His public life and conduct, guided by principals of rectitude, independence of thought and straightforward dealing were traits of character that won for him the high regard and esteem of his fellow citizens," his obituary read.

The oration at his graveside was given by the then Labour TD for Limerick, MJ Keyes.

The last surviving member of a Council to serve with Ald Casey, another former Mayor, Ted Russell said this week that the honour was long overdue.

"Definitely that should be put right. There is no doubt about it," he said

recalling the late Ald Casey as "a great Limerick citizen and an excellent public representative."

"There should be a street or something named after him. He certainly deserves it," Mr Russell said.



Mai Birkhead at home in Castleconnell with a portrait of her late father, Cllr JM Casey. (LL)

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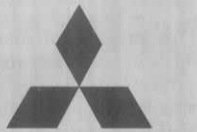
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