

# Michael F. O'Keeffe Of Kilfinane

THE Christmas season is saddened this year for many of us by news of the passing of one of the most earnest and enthusiastic of Gaels, Michael F. O'Keeffe, of Kilfinane, whose death in the prime of life has severed a golden link with great days in the story of Gaeldom.

Immersed from his schooldays in the affairs of the Gael, Mick was the very life and soul of the G.A.A. in his native town all through the intervening years, never flagging in his interest and enthusiasm.

His most impressionable years witnessed a great spell in Kilfinane hurling—a period when the parish figured once more in senior ranks, and gave some terrific displays against many of the leading teams in Limerick and adjoining counties.

## ENOUGH TO AROUSE THE OLD SPIRIT.

Kilfinane were unlucky not to have really hit the high spots during that spell, as they did thirty years earlier in the halcyon days of their great double All-Ireland success of Championship and Cup, but they did enough to arouse the old spirit in the parish, and to leave an indelible impression on such as Mick O'Keeffe, who ever afterwards dreamt of the day when the Kilfinane colours would be the toast of Limerick once more.

Secretary of the Kilfinane Club for more years than many of us would care to own up to, and the G.A.A. itself in the parish during some of the time, when the enthusiasm of others was a low ebb, Mick gave everything that was in him to the propagation of the games, and even neglected his own well being at times in the endeavour to further the interests of the G.A.A.

A Kilfinane man in every fibre of his being, there was nothing parochial, however, in his outlook and Limerick teams, no matter their composition, had in him an ardent admirer and consistent supporter, who rarely missed a match of any importance. Equally interested in the affairs of his Division, he was a popular figure at South Limerick venues, and knew most of the players in the area stretching back many years. In the Council Chamber, too, he gave valuable assistance to the games and his knowledge of the rules was not easily equalled. Appointed Registrar of the South on two separate occasions, he was later honoured with the position of Vice-Chairman—a tribute to the high esteem in which he was held.

He piloted Kilfinane through some real glory spells, and was actively associated with the winning by the parish of no less than seven South Limerick titles.

## JUNIOR HURLING TEAM OF 1934.

The first of these came his way in 1934 when the junior hurling team hit the headlines. The leading players in that success will be recalled: Edmund Hayden, the goalkeeper, who was a nephew of Jackie Ryan, of the great 1926 senior team; the brothers, Cecil, Dan and Dick O'Shaughnessy; Jimmy O'Brien, Paddy O'Riordan and his brother Dave, Jimmy Connery, Tommy O'Brien, son of Paddy of the All-Ireland team of 1897; the brothers Denny and Tommy Leahy; Michael J. Carroll, Jacky Cleary, Willie Harris, Paddy Ryan, Jack Finn, who had three uncles on the 1897 team; Davy Moloney, Thomas Martin, Denis Grimes, nephew of the All-Ireland captain and namesake; and last but by no means least, Johnnie Grimes, son of the 1897 skipper and Mick's great helper down the years—the "man that looked after the hurleys." Johnnie paid the last great tribute when he participated in the parade at the funeral—a last rite reserved for the "faithful and the few."

Sunday, September 22nd, 1940, was a proud day for Kilfinane, for that evening at Kilmallock the hurlers regained the South Limerick junior hurling title, by defeating Knockaney, 6-3 to 5-3, in a great game. Red haired Davy Moloney and Jack Finn of the 1934 side were familiar figures that day, to be ably supported by stalwarts like Jimmy Tobin, one of the great Kilfinane men of our generation, and winner of an All-Ireland junior medal with Limerick in 1941. Jimmy also figured in the Munster senior finals of 1942 and 1946, and still takes a deep and abiding interest in Kilfinane and Limerick hurling. Now Rev. Fr. Tobin, he made the long journey

from the S.M.A. College at Ballynagard, Co. Mayo, for the funeral of one whom he treasured as a real friend.

## OTHER TEAM MATES OF 1940.

Jimmy was a student at Mungret College in 1940 and amongst other team mates on that Kilfinane side he had Jimmy Hanley of Cooleen—"below the town"—a lovely striker; Jerry Flynn, who was also a fine handballer; Paddy Lee of Glenroe, a Limerick minor of 1938, and his brother Jim (the former a grand hurler, red haired and fiery); Stephen McGrath, whom we saw as full-forward with Kilmallock in the County Junior hurling final against South Liberties a few years ago; Joe Creed (brother of Very Rev. Fr. Creed, Adm., St. John's); Kevin Foley, Neilus Barrett, Paddy Ryan, an Army lad who wore the County jersey; Paddy McSweeney of Glenroe—the Limerick junior net minder of 1937, who got such poor covering that day in Fermoy in the Munster Final that he resolved to desert the goals for good; another Glenroe lad, Jack Rea, brother of Very Rev. David Rea, P.P., Parteen, a former Chairman of the West Limerick Board; Ned McGrath, of Ardpatrick and that regular giant of a man, John Joe O'Sullivan, of Glenroe.

Three players who were to bring the County title back to Kilfinane in 1944, won the Junior "All-Ireland" with Limerick in 1941. They were: Jimmy Tobin, Kevin Foley and Owen O'Brien of Bruff, who was creamery manager in Kilfinane at the time. Others who participated in the 1944 success were Gerald Tobin, brother of Jimmie's, Jack Dwyer of Ballintubber (now a priest in Scotland); that very fine hurler, Stephen Palmer; the brothers Paddy, Ned and Stephen McGrath of Ardpatrick; the evergreen Jack Finn, Paddy Sweeney (Glenroe), Allan Mee (Ballyorgan), Jimmy Hanley, Joe Creed, Neilus Barrett, Val Condon, Dinny Casey and Gerald McNamee, now Rev. G. McNamee, great mentor of the Limerick All-Ireland minor success of 1958.

## THREE TITLES IN A ROW.

Kilfinane's most sustained hurling spell was for the years from 1948 to 1950, when the minors won three Southern hurling titles in a row. The Nunan twin brothers—Eamonn and David, figured in all three successes, and three McNamee brothers played together in 1949—Dave, Mick and Paddy. The two former are now priests, Fr. Dave, Chaplain at the Regional Hospital, Fr. Mick, on the missions in Scotland. Fr. Mick was also a County minor player as were also John Downes and Tommy O'Keeffe. Mick and Paddy McNamee won all three Southern titles.

Other lads that come readily to mind of that bright period of Kilfinane hurling, include Mick and Paddy Howard of Glenroe, the latter now Rev. P. Howard, C.C., Askeaton; Paddy Bolger, being ordained an Augustinian priest in Rome this Christmas; Jimmy Fitzgibbon, Liam O'Sullivan, Tom Ryan, Mick Mullins of Ballintubber; Tony Walsh, Con O'Dea, Bobby Tobin, Mick Kelly, Bob O'Keeffe (Glenroe), Doney and Liam McCarthy, Andy and Pa. Ryan.

The parish won its only football title in 1952, and I will deal with that success, and with other aspects of Mick O'Keeffe's long association with Gaeldom in my next article of this series.

## GREAT LIMERICK SPORTSMEN

# Michael F. O'Keeffe Of Kilfinane

(CONCLUDED)

THE Kilfinane minor footballers were the surprise of the South in 1952. Their first notable triumph came with the defeat of a fancied Knockane side, whom they defeated 1-3 to 0-2 at Knocklong, after being led 0-2 to nil at the interval.

They met Galbally in the Southern decider and the general opinion was that the lads from the great fortress must triumph. A great final it turned out, and Kilfinane created another first-class shock when they captured the laurels, winning by a solitary point in a stirring finish.

The Kilfinane lads on that memorable day were:— L. Devane, L. McAuliffe, J. Lynch, A. Ryan, M. Ryan, D. Quirke, W. O'Sullivan, P. Bolger, J. Fitzgerald, J. Walsh, P. Tobin, T. Palmer, T. Walsh, M. Farrell and D. McAuliffe.

Mick's keen sense of humour was well illustrated on that occasion. A great hurling stronghold had triumphed over a noted football nursery, and when Paddy Ryan, the Chairman of the South Board, and a Galbally man, presented Kilfinane with the Mullins Cup, Mick pulled a hurling ball from his pocket and said to Paddy: "I think this is the game for Galbally from now on."

The County semi-final did not take place until the end of September, by which time a number of the student members of the Kilfinane team had returned to college. Withall, they gave a good display against Pallas, at Hospital, going down 1-0 to 0-1 in a hard-fought tussle.

The young lads were Mick's concern always, and I well remember speaking to him a few days before the 1940 County final, when he said to me: "We may not win Sunday's match; we're not really expected to, as our best lads have returned to college and will not be available. Although needless to say, we'll try very hard to do so, but whether we do or not there is one thing that has been done and that is the youths are once again taking up the caman. After all, that is what really matters, for we have had a tough fight to keep going for the past five years."

Mick continued: "After our defeat in the 1934 County final, we met a serious set back when we were badly beaten in the first round of the 1935 championship, which was played on the knock-out system. The following year a rugby team started in the town and all of the team and officials, with the exception of three players and two of the committee, joined it. Well, thank God, all of us did not see things that way. We were, however, in a bad fix. We had to affiliate a team, as it would never do to let the youths get interested in rugby, and maybe never get them back for years. Anyway, we got a team together—minors and lads who'd never caught a hurley. That year we had the League system. In the first match, against the worst team, we were badly beaten; but they kept going and trained hard and in the next match against Effin were beaten by a point, and in the following game lost to Kilmallock, a fancied side, by a goal and a point. Both were the best and most exciting games of the year. Our followers were delighted, the youths were again talking 'hurling' and the rugby club was dead."

Mick believed in getting all the matches he could for his beloved young lads, and it was no trouble to him to hire a bus and take them for a practice game anywhere it could be arranged—the expense usually out of his own pocket.

A great man to make a successful switch on a team, he had a great confidence in his Kilfinane lads, and it was one of his underlying principles that no one was ever sure of beating a Kilfinane team until they were going home winners in their cars after the match.

A great sportsman, Mick was a good man to take a beating and never sought excuses for defeat. Many will remember the occasion of the Calughaun v. Kilfinane County minor hurling final. A very inclement day, Claughaun were very late fielding on the occasion. Mick Mackey was the referee, but Mick O'Keeffe refused to take advantage of Claughaun's default and insisted on playing the match, which the city lads won.

One of the greatest games of the three year minor spell of glory was that against Kilmallock, played at Elton on August 15, 1950. Rivalry was particularly keen between the pair and Mick had such confidence in his lads that he was reputed to have "his shirt" on the outcome. It was his custom to

give to the players a glass of water to which he added a liberal dose of glucose powder to "steady their nerves."

During the process on this occasion a wag remarked: "Mickey, you would want to take the whole box yourself."

He got wide excited at games, in which his favourite team was engaged, and I well remember a friend describing the excitement at a particular match and saying it was so intense that Micky O'Keeffe was seen to "eat the grass on the sideline."

Fond of congenial company after a game, he was the life and soul of any party and a great spinner of yarns, regularly telling one against himself.

His love of hurling was widely recognised and friends often tried to "rise" him about his attachment to the game. He made a joke of any such attempt, as the occasion when someone asked him how he got the mark on his nose, and he related how it was the result of the crack of a hurley whilst playing corner-forward for St. Colman's of Fermoy against Farranferris. One of the company immediately butted in: "You told me that yarn five or six years ago, but it was North Monastery then, not Farranferris." Mickey quickly retorted: "Yerra, if you ever hurled against one of the other you would be so excited that it would be a week later before you would know whether you had a mark or not."

A real artist in every sense of the word as understood by Gaels, he knew the rule book off by heart, or "backwards," as some would rather put it. That did not necessarily mean that he was beyond breaking a rule occasionally, and his encounters with a few other rule "sticklers" at Board meetings were a treat to hear. When questioned sometimes about an exceptionally good minor, his defence was always the same—they hailed from the "middle of the town."

His newsagent's shop in Kilfinane was the meeting place of Gael-dom in the district, and he could talk for hours on end about hurling. At various times he gathered around him some great helpers, and I can recall the names of Fr. Tom O'Donnell, Castletown; Fr. Howard, Glenroe; Fr. Jimmie Tobin, Mick Hanley, Johnny Grimes, John Quinn, Denny Casey and T. O'Keeffe, as some who were closely associated with the great work he performed in the cause of the Gael.

A great favourite with everyone, and always in good humour, Mick believed in the value of publicity and never failed to celebrate a local victory with a big parade of the Cup around the town, accompanied by the Band.

He came of fine Gaelic stock—and his three brothers—priests on the American mission—John Henry, Gerard and Denis, are great hearted Gaels who follow the fortunes of Kilfinane and Limerick hurling all down the years.

Mick was in poor health for some time past and was actually in a Dublin hospital on the occasion of the 1958 minor All-Ireland Final and insisted on getting out to see the same. He was thrilled by that great Limerick win for he maintained his great interest in the youth to the very end.

It was thus fitting that the juvenile players were entrusted with the task of forming the guard of honour around his coffin on the last sad journey to the historic Hill of Ardpatrik.

Mick's one ambition in life was to see a Gaelic field in Kilfinane. He regularly stressed this point, and the greatest tribute that could be paid his memory would be the raising of a playing field where the youth of the parish could practice the national games.

**BOTH ARE PRIESTS NOW.**

Kilfinane owes much to the MacCarthy brothers—Donal and Liam—who, on many occasions helped to bring the laurels of victory home to Kilfinane. Both are now priests. Father Donal is on the mission in Afcolaco, N. Transvaal, South Africa. Father Liam, who was also a prominent figure on the team, is at present attached to the Redemptorist Monastery, Mount St. Alphonsus, Limerick. During the spring Fr. McCarthy, C.S.S.R., will leave for the Philippine Islands and will carry with him the prayers of his numerous friends.