

No. 157—GEORGE RYAN of Adare

(By Seamus O'Ceallaigh)

GEORGE RYAN left his native Adare shortly after the G.A.A. was founded, but the part he played in building what is perhaps the greatest club in the Association—the famous Faughs of Dublin—earns him a place in this gallery of great Limerick sportsmen.

This remarkable club was first mooted by a group of earnest Gaels at a gathering under the renowned "Big Tree" in the Phoenix Park, where the "Nation" newspaper was born, and the first official meeting of the new club was held in the home of Michael Cusack, then resident in Dublin.

Faughs were actually the second hurling club in Dublin—the Metropolitan's ("Michael Cusack's Own") being the first. The new organisation affiliated hurling and football teams, and, although most of my readers will associate Faughs with hurling, the fact remains that they were football champions of Dublin before the first of their many hurling titles were won.

IN THE THICK OF THE EARLY EFFORTS.

George Ryan was in the thick of the early efforts to revive Gaelic games by the Shannon, and had figured in some worth while endeavours around his native district before leaving Limerick for the metropolis, where he was immediately attracted to the Faughs banner.

In the Dublin club he found many grand companions, mainly grocers' assistants, with a goodly proportion of them hailing from Tipperary, from where the clarion call had gone out from Croke and Davin, seeking the support of the nation for the infant G.A.A.

The hurling George Ryan had witnessed in his young days around the Maigue was very different from the present day variety. Any old crooked stick served as a hurley, and the ball was certainly as big as a youth's football is nowadays. Even roughly prepared pitches were dreams of the future—the early games in Limerick were cross-country affairs, often fought from parish to parish.

He saw something of organised rules and a proper playing space on his first visit to the Phoenix Park, where the hurling and football conscious lads, the very great bulk of them "up from the country," gathered to practise the games of Ireland.

HEAVY OPPOSITION.

They met opposition hot and heavy in those pioneering days of the long ago. Employers, almost without exception, gave absolutely no encouragement to the new departure and it took many hard and bitter years to break the prejudice and worse that did its damnest to stifle the G.A.A. before it became anything like the great organisation we are familiar with to-day.

George Ryan was typical of the hundreds of brave and far seeing Gaels who fought every type of tyranny in their efforts to keep the Gaelic flag afloat. The big Dublin clubs could be counted on the fingers of one hand for many years—Metropolitans, Faughs, Kickhams, Rapparees and Commercials—and all of them experienced a tough fight for survival.

Only for the broad acres of the Phoenix Park they would often be without a place to play, and even there they only got grudging accommodation and no approval.

When it is realised that even some of the early All-Ireland finals were fought on the open spaces of the Park—both hurling and football finals were played there the same day as late as 1894, ten years after the G.A.A. was founded, it will be realised that finance was a thing that just didn't exist, and these lads had to dig deep into slender pockets for the few trips they could afford to outside territory.

EVERY FOREIGN INFLUENCE AGAINST THEM.

Deeper still, however, did they dig into the national conscience of the Dublin of their day. Gathering adherents as they went, they were in the thick of the fight against every foreign influence in the capital, and surprised the complacent Dubliner by the great numbers they mustered to march with hurleys aloft in the big funeral processions of P. W. Nally and C. S. Parnell.

Another great patron of the G.A.A., the Fenian leader, John O'Leary, got a huge audience of Gaels for a big rally in Church Street, Dublin, that marked a strong advance in the national revival. Again, in 1903, George Ryan took a prominent part in the organisation of the Emmet Centenary celebrations, during which four thousand hurlers marched, complete with jerseys and camans, to a monster demonstration in the Phoenix Park.

Faughs won the Dublin football crown in 1889 but it was eleven years later before their first hurling laurels were gained. However they then won five titles in half a dozen years and George Ryan played in all of them.

A GREAT TIPPERARY GAEL.

A great Tipperary Gael, Danny McCormack, of Borrisoleigh, captained these teams, and was skipper of the Dublin side that lost to Tipperary in the 1906 All-Ireland final. A hurling follower all his life, Danny died suddenly at a Leinster final in Portlaoise over thirty years later, and Faughs paid their tribute by erecting a memorial to commemorate his great service to the club—an act in which George Ryan, amongst other old comrades, had a prominent part.

Typical of the men and the times was an incident in that final of nearly half a century ago. The venue was Kilkenny, and the Tipperary goalkeeper, the famous "Hawk" O'Brien, through some misunderstanding, missed the party making the journey by long cars from Thurles for the game. Nothing perturbed, however, he set off and walked most of the thirty miles to the Marble City, arriving just in time to take his place between the posts.

Of the Dublin players that day, the outstanding display came from Jack Grace, who narrowly missed the distinction of winning dual All-Ireland honours in hurling and football. Jack, who was a Kilkennyman, won five All-Ireland football medals in the early years of the century.

HURLING CONTEST AT FONTENOY.

Tipperary, by their victory on that occasion, gained the honours of a trip with Cork to the Celtic Congress at Brussels, and both teams played an exhibition hurling game on the famed battlefield of Fontenoy. George Ryan would have dearly liked to play there, because of the association of Limerick soldiers of the Irish Brigade

with that great victory against the oppressors of his country.

Associated all through a long life time with the team that has all the time figured strong in Dublin and Irish hurling, George Ryan was familiar with all the great men who wore the popular club colours. Down through the years well known hurling names are encountered—John Dillon, Jim O'Riordan, Mick Murphy, Andy Fitzgerald, Tom Hayes, Andy Harty, Harry Boland, Tommy Moore, Pat Cullen, Mick Neville (a near neighbour, from Kilmenny), Bob Meagher, "Daider" Walsh, Jimmy Cleary, Harry Grey, and Tony Herbert.

Maybe it is fitting that one above the others should hold a special place. James Boland was one of the earliest Dublin County Board chairmen, and proved an active and unwavering adherent of militant nationalism all his life.

Harry Boland first came to the limelight as a member of the Rathmines hurling team, but as he advanced in strength and years, his merits became widely recognised, and he joined the famous Faughs, with whom he gained County distinction.

INTREPID BAND.

Amongst the intrepid band who organised and manned the later ranks of Irish national resurgence, Harry Boland's place was fitting and inevitable. None recognised that better than his friends in Gaeldom, and George Ryan once told me how Harry followed his father as unerringly into the ranks of Gaeldom as unhesitatingly he took up the struggle for independence which his sire had always maintained. Harry, too, occupied the chair of the Dublin County Board, and the last memory our Adare veteran has of him, was to see him engaged in an impromptu game of "rounders" in Croke Park. The sky was then dark over Ireland—it was the days of Civil strife, and many of the happy and purposeful associations Harry had formed had been sundered. But the boy heart was still his—a little heavier, perhaps, because it had grown bigger. The tragedy of Harry's untimely fate robbed Gaeldom of one that would have made a worthy contribution to the making of the new Ireland.

SAW ALL THE GREAT GAMES.

George Ryan saw all the great games down the Gaelic years and considers the Kilkenny team of the 1905 to 1913 era the greatest of all time. In proof of that he mentions the Railway Shield final, in which sixteen Kilkenny men and Mike Cummins, of Wexford, beat the pick of Munster in one of the finest games he ever saw.

To Lory Meagher he gives the palm as hurling's greatest exponent: "His speed and style were a joy to watch," but he regards Mick Mackey the trickiest man he witnessed with a caman. To Andy Fitzgerald goes his vote as Ireland's greatest goalkeeper: "He had a marvellous knack of blocking a ball down to his feet," whilst Sean Og Murphy was his choice as the best full back of all time.

He has his memories, too, of Jack Rochford, Jim Kelleher, Tom Semple, Hughie Shelley, the Doyles, the Graces, "Tyler" Mackey, Mick Feely, Paddy Flaherty, happy memories of great days not to be forgotten.