

*Cybil White*

## J.J. Keane

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With the ratification of the Truce with the British Government by Dail Eireann in early 1922, J.J. Keane, who, at this time was Chairman of the Athletic Council within the Gaelic Athletic Association, was summoned to a special meeting in Dublin by General Eoin O'Duffy, then Director of Organisation in the Irish government.

O'Duffy, always deeply interested in sport, issued what was little short of an ultimatum to Keane. Without delay he was to devote himself totally to the unification of the various athletic bodies in Ireland and, of greater importance, he was to ensure that Ireland, as an independent nation, would be adequately represented at the VIIIth Olympic Games due to be staged at Paris in 1924.

O'Duffy, clearly, was obvious of the strength of Keane who, by then, had already established himself as one the strongest personalities in Irish sport. If any man was capable of achieving O'Duffy's command, Keane, unquestionably, was the ideal candidate.

That J.J. Keane, born at Anglesboro, on the borders of Co. Limerick and Co. Cork was independent, private and aloof, authoritative, demanding, utterly single-minded and thoroughly efficient would, I think, by my lengthy researches into his career, be a reasonable and acceptable estimation of an extraordinary and complex individual who deserves to be remembered with considerable dis-

tingtion as the powerful and influential father-figure of the Olympic movement in Ireland.

His passion for sport, particularly for Gaelic Football and Hurling, track and field athletics and Olympic competition was vast and throughout his active years of office in a variety of sporting undertakings, he was an unceasing, tireless and enthusiastic worker.

But it is on record that during those years, he was also a highly controversial figure, at times domineering and, indeed, ruthless and that frequently, he offended and estranged many people with his dogmatic views and opinions.

In his book, "The G.A.A. A History", the celebrated historian, Marcus de Burca, describes Keane as "the hot-headed Limerick man" and in writing about the division between the Athletic Council and the Munster Athletes Protection Association, he has this to say:

"Most of the responsibility for the dispute must rest with J.J. Keane. President of the Athletic Council who had been permitted by the Association (G.A.A.), to run athletics almost single headed, justifying the demands for a more democratic system of management ... Keane's domineering and obstinate attitude to the M.A.P.A. consisted largely of old associates in the G.A.A., only served to put off the day when the G.A.A. found itself forced to concede the claims of the Munster athletes to a bigger voice in their own affairs".

The late Pdraig Puirseal, in his obituary of J.J. Keane in the Irish Press (1956), also remembered Keane as a controversial personality.

"He was a strange and aloof man, unbending in his decisions and difficult to know. He frequently ran foul of other legislators in sport and certainly many of his decisions were not popular. But he maintained his great love of sport throughout his long life and until a short time before his death was a regular visitor to Croke Park".

And Sean O'Siochain, the former Director-General of the G.A.A. remembers those Croke Park visits: "He took the same seat in the old Hogan Stand almost every Sunday and always remained on his own. He was an extremely private man and to a great extent unapproachable man. He rarely spoke to anyone and few ever spoke to him".

J.J. Keane worked on the family farm at Anglesboro until he was 18 and then following an examination and an interview, he took up a junior clerical position with the firm of Dodd and Son, a corn, hay and grain company at Smithfield in Dublin. Later he was to become manager of the company, eventually took over control and was still its owner at the time of his death on Easter Sunday, April 14, 1956.

During his early years in Dublin he became an outstanding sportsman and won two All-Ireland Football medals with Dublin (1898 and 1899). He was also to win the Irish 120 yards Hurdles championship in 1900.

Already, at this time, he had become deeply involved in the administration of sport with the Dublin G.A.A. Board and it is on record that he tried for the Presidency of the G.A.A. in 1899 but was defeated by Michael Deering.

With the foundation of the Athletic Council within the G.A.A. at the Annual Congress of 1905, J.J. Keane finally achieved the position of power he had obvi-

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ously been seeking within the G.A.A. He was appointed Secretary, became President in 1910 and from then to the dissolution of the Athletic Council in 1922 he was to exert an immense influence on track and field athletics in Ireland.

With the dissolution also of the Irish Amateur Athletic Association and the fusion of the Athletic Council and the I.A.A.A. into the National Athletic and Cycling Association, he was to become the first President of the N.A.C.A. Even then, however, he was to maintain his links with other sports. With the Dublin Board of the G.A.A., he remained an active administrator of the Association, he also involved himself deeply with the Irish Handball Association, became one of the prime movers behind the establishment of the Tailteann Games — and, of course, he immersed himself totally in the Olympic movement ... and this was to provide a most unusual story.

Having fulfilled the first of General Eoin O'Duffy's demands for unity in Irish athletics, J.J. Keane next took it on himself to pursue the matter of Olympic recognition for Ireland as an independent nation.

On April 10, 1922 he wrote to Baron Pierre de Coubertin, then the President of the International Olympic Committee with a formal application that Ireland should be recognised as an independent nation in the Olympic Games — and this letter was signed by Keane as the President of the G.A.A., which, of course, he most certainly was not.

However, following an exchange of correspondence, J.J. Keane was invited to attend the 20th Session of the International Olympic Committee which was held that year in Paris between June 7-10, 1922.

After the formal opening of this 20th Session, Baron Pierre de Coubertin proposed that the recognition of Ireland as an independent nation should be discussed and, by all accounts, a considerable amount of time was given to this discussion.

In his address to the I.O.C., J.J. Keane spoke of the re-organisation of sport which he had achieved "on his own" in Ireland and that unity had been reached in athletics and he pointed out that there were now 365 active athletic clubs in Ireland. At the end of his lengthy address, he was asked to withdraw and after his withdrawal, one of the British members of the I.O.C., Brigadier-General R.K. Kentish asked to have the matter of Ireland's recognition deferred.

This was agreed on but clearly there was a change of mood overnight. On the following morning J.J. Keane was recalled to the 20th Session and he was given an unanimous guarantee that Ireland would be recognised as an independent nation at the VIIIth Olympic Games at Paris in 1924. The only proviso put forward by Brigadier-General Kentish was that by then Ireland's unity in athletics would be recognised by the International Amateur Athletic Federation.

The surprise, indeed, the shock of that morning's business, however, was that J.J. Keane was elected to the International Olympic Committee — the first Irishman to be accorded this single honour. At this time, and perhaps it should be stressed, the Olympic Council of Ireland or the Irish Olympic Council as it was known in its early years, had not yet come into official existence.

A year later J.J. Keane attended the 21st Session of the International Olympic

Committee in Rome between April 7-12 and at this session Ireland's recognition and participation in the forthcoming Olympic Games at Paris in 1924 were "unanimously endorsed".

But when the Irish Olympic Council — or the Olympic Council of Ireland as it is now known — came into the official existence is not known. The first minute book of the Council went missing many years ago and, despite an intensive search on my part, it has never been found.

The probability is that the Council came into existence sometime after the 21st Session of the International Olympic Committee and perhaps before the end of April or possibly early May, 1923. The only substance I have been able to trace for this is a reference by P.J. Devlin in a column in "The Catholic Bulletin" for June 1923, in which he wrote about Ireland's participation in the 1924 Olympic Games and added: "Ireland's Olympic authorities are now a reality".

However, J.J. Keane stands as the first official Olympian of Ireland as an independent nation — and the first Irish member of the International Olympic Committee. He was to remain a member of the I.O.C. until his resignation in 1951.