

With regards and best wishes
Cyril White.

John James Keane: Ireland's Greatest Sports Administrator

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For a country with such a distinguished and outstanding sporting history as Ireland, its documentary record is as lacking as its level of sporting achievement is outstanding. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the recorded achievements of those who established Ireland's sporting legacies. Such sportsmen and administrators as J.J.Keane, Edward J. Walsh, John P. Boland, William Morton, Pdraig O'Cuiv, Charles Barrington and W.W. Dunlop among a number of others, all await biographies or even biographical monogrammes. Little is known and less recorded of these Irishmen who made possible our present Irish sporting world. Yet without them the Olympic Council of Ireland, the contemporary Gaelic Athletic Association, Lansdowne Road Rugby Ground, the Irish Rugby Football Union, Ireland's Olympic successes at the inaugural Olympic Games at Athens in 1896 and at subsequent Olympic Games and many other Irish Sporting organisations and Olympic and other international sporting achievements, would not be in existence as they are today.

J.J.Keane

Many examples could be cited but certainly the most outstanding example of this sporting historical neglect, is the story of the Co. Limerick man John James Keane. J.J.Keane's contributions and achievements in the field of Irish Sport and his sporting legacy is both outstanding and remarkable by any standards. In any other country his memory would be recognised and honoured both nationally as well as internationally but to most Irish sportsmen and sportswomen and to Irish Sports administrators and officials in general, his name, let alone his sporting achievements and legacy are unknown or forgotten.

To illustrate his sporting achievements and legacy we could start with his founding of the Olympic Council of Ireland then move on to his founding of the National Athletic and Cycling Association of Ireland both of these All-Ireland bodies. Then to his first international associations and membership, through being Ireland's first Member of the International Olympic Committee and being sponsored and proposed for Membership by the founder of the Modern Olympic Games himself, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. This sponsorship of J.J.Keane by Baron de Coubertin, tells us a lot about Keane and de Coubertin's regard for him and for Irish Sport which Keane represented.

J.J.Keane's second international association was his membership, and Ireland's membership of the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF). The President of the IAAF, J. Sigfrid Edström of Sweden, was a fellow Member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and Keane and Edström were to become firm friends with Edström being most helpful and understanding when difficulties arose in the mid-1930's between the IAAF and Ireland over membership of the World's International Athletics body. But all this was to be in the future.

More....

On J.J.Keane's return to Dublin from Paris in 1922 after being elected to Membership of the IOC, Keane founded the Olympic Council of Ireland (known at the time as the Irish Olympic Council) with himself as President and his long time associate, Andrew Harty (President of the Handball Association of Ireland) as Hon. Secretary. The Olympic Council of Ireland became the National Olympic body for Ireland and was so recognised and registered with the International Olympic Committee at its headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland.

J.J.Keane now turned his attention to Irish track and field athletics where he had had for many years an active and administrative involvement and role. For many years, from Feb.1885 in fact, Ireland had two feuding athletics bodies, the Athletics Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Amateur Athletic Association (IAAA). Keane the long time President of the Athletics Council of the GAA, approached the President of the IAAA, Dr. R.J.Rowlette, with the suggestion that the two bodies combine and form an All-Ireland Athletics controlling body to be called the National Athletic and Cycling Association of Ireland (NACAI). As a result of Keane's ability and persuasiveness and Dr. Rowlette's open-mindedness to a new athletics arrangement, unity was achieved between two long term feuding athletics bodies. This new All-Ireland controlling body came into being in the Summer of 1922 with J.J.Keane as its first President, Dr. Rowlette as Vice President and the ubiquitous Andy Harty as Hon. Secretary. This new national controlling body was registered by Keane with the International Amateur Athletic Federation in Stockholm as the national controlling body for athletics in Ireland and the IAAF duly recognised the NACAI as such in 1924. (This continued up to 1935 when the rules on membership of the IAAF were changed and the NACAI refused to accept these changed rules of membership and thereby left the IAAF and participation in international athletics completely. This caused J.J.Keane great distress).

Within two years however from 1922, Keane had four outstanding national and international sporting achievements of the highest order, to his credit and incredibly, against the odds. But even after these successes he was far from finished in his sporting endeavours. He was appointed to the executive committee of the IAAF and both his IOC and IAAF roles were called upon to contribute to the Paris Olympic Games of 1924, the "Chariots of Fire" Olympics. On the domestic front he was responsible for selecting, training, transporting and leading the entire Irish Olympic Team as Chef de Mission, to Paris for the 1924 Games. All this he did most successfully and Ireland returned with two Olympic Medals, a silver and a bronze, both won in the Arts competitions. These were to be Ireland's first Olympic Medals to be won as an independent country.

But J.J.Keane was not finished. He had been appointed by the Government to the Executive Committee of the Tailteann Festival to be held two weeks after the Paris Olympics in August 1924. The Executive Committee appointed him as the Director of the entire athletics programme to be held in Croke Park. During the Olympics in Paris, in addition to all the national and international meetings and other activities, he was committed to, he also had to secure the appearance of as many Olympic Champions and other Olympic competitors as he could get to come to Dublin for the Tailteann Games and Festival, two weeks later. In this demanding assignment he was also highly successful.

More....

Due to his Olympic position, contacts in the IAAF and personal ability he persuaded five Olympic Champions and many other Olympic competitors to come to Dublin for the first Tailteann Games and Festival of the Modern Era. How J.J.Keane was able to achieve all this in the short time available is a mystery to many, but he did and the Tailteann Games especially the athletics events, were both a national and international success. An important result, from the Government's perspective, was that the Tailteann Games and Festival were successful financially.

While there were other very capable people involved, J.J.Keane was by far the most able and senior official of the Games and Festival. Like the Olympic Games, the Tailteann Games were also a cultural festival with art, music, drama and literature all included in the Games and Festival. The entire celebrations were officially titled -

Aonach Tailteann.

J.J.Keane continued to be involved as Director of Athletics and in the 1928 Tailteann Games, which were equally if not more successful than the 1924 Games, and in 1929 he was appointed Director of the entire 1932 Games and Festival. Sadly the 1932 Tailteanns were not successful due to a number of factors outside Keane's control as well as a radical change in Government policy. Also sadly and due to the conflict between the NACAI and the IAAF in 1934-'35 **Aonach Tailteann** were never held again.

Nevertheless J.J.Keane continued with his interests in both athletics where he had been the Irish 120yds. Hurdles Champion (1900), and Gaelic Football where he had won two All-Ireland Senior Football medals (1898 and 1899) with the team he had co-founded in 1896, the Geraldines Club of Dublin. On many occasions he could be seen in his favourite seat in the Hogan stand Croke Park during championship Games where he was always looked after by that other distinguished sports administrator, Pdraig O'Cuiv.

J.J.Keane remained the Member for Ireland of the International Olympic Committee until 1951 when on retirement he was succeeded by Lord Killanin who went on to become President of the IOC in 1972. J.J.Keane's final Olympic Games as IOC Member for Ireland, was to be the London Games of 1948 where he once again renewed his friendship with Sigfrid Edström who was now the President of the International Olympic Committee. The present writer actually saw J.J.Keane with President Edström at these Olympic Games but did not recognise him at the time.

What a story J.J.Keane could have told if interviewed about his sporting experiences at that time!!!!!!

Finally and sadly, it brings little credit to all of us involved in Irish sport that this truly extraordinary Irishman of national and international status in sport, has been totally forgotten by officials and sportsmen and sportswomen and others in Irish Sport, at Olympic, international and national level. The writer and some senior members of Ireland's sporting bodies feel that this will be perhaps the last time that we have an opportunity to document John James Keane's life, times, contributions and legacy to Irish Sport. The modus to achieve this documentation would be a biography of J.J.Keane which would leave a documentary and biographic record of Ireland's greatest sports administrator.

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Dr. White has a long-time interest in sport and athletics and in particular the history of Irish Sport and the personalities that contributed to it. For ten years Dr. White was the Athletics Coach at Trinity College Dublin. In 1990 Dr. White was elected the founding President of the Irish Universities Athletics' Association.