

# Great Limerick Athletes

## No. 106—JOHNNY SWEENEY of Young Irelands

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

NOSTALGIC memories of one of the greatest hurling clubs that Limerick knew will be recalled with the career of Johnny Sweeney—a hurler, a Gael and a soldier of Ireland—one of the founders of the famed Young Ireland Club, now gone, alas, like our youth, too soon!

Things were very different than they are now in the days at the turn of the century, when Young Ireland first saw the light as a Gaelic Club, later to make such a name for itself not only in the hurling history of Limerick, but of all Ireland.

Travelling was much more of an adventure then than it is now. There were no graded teams, no secondary championships, and none of the provision now considered essential for the comfort of travellers. Such trips as were then made had to be arranged between club and club—the near ones were accomplished by "long car"—the others were invariably fixed to avail of some cheap excursion. The railway companies, of course, made no pretence of catering for such plebeian traffic.

The discomforts inseparable from travel in those days were many and varied but nobody minded them then, and there is not a lot to be gained by dwelling on them now. The high spirit of indifference to conditions with which the old timers set out made light of inconveniences and carried them to their destination, through the rigours of the day and home again, and ever eager for the next foray into some other stronghold of Gaelic Ireland.

### A VERITABLE BROTHERHOOD.

And expenses were, of course, a thing undreamt of in those days. Visiting teams bore their own travel charges—the players themselves invariably paid, yet there was never any difficulty in getting a team together for a friendly invasion—near or far. Nor was an idle member willing to travel ever left behind. It was a veritable brotherhood—a brotherhood of the caman—although most of the lads had very little else in common.

On arrival at their destination they were generally entertained in hospitable, if homely, fashion. Rough meat sandwiches and a barrel of beer—sometimes of local brew—supplied in a tent or barn, were all they ever expected or wanted. Sometimes, of course, on the occasion of a tournament or other important outing, they would be treated to a sit down repast in some modest hostelry. Even then, often as not, half the crowd would have found more congenial havens for themselves. They were "good mixers" in those days and made themselves at home wherever they went. Good sports too, the result of the match hardly mattered a rap, and some of the popular teams of those days the old timers recall so wistfully were so used to defeat that an occasional victory was said to "upset" them.

### THE YOUNG IRELAND CLUB.

Formed in the dying years of the last century the Young Ireland Club was inspired by and derived its name from the Young Ireland Society, which was a virile branch of the Young Ireland movement, so prominent in the Irish political scene of its day.

Though probably one of the weakest clubs at its start, from the playing point of view, the members had always an intense interest in the national games for their own sake and traditions. This spirit was sustained by ardent enthusiasts like Johnny Sweeney and by close contact with leading figures of the Gaelic and national movements of the times.

Closely allied as it was with the Young Ireland Society, all the early meetings of the Young Ireland Club were held in the Young Ireland Society Club Rooms, 55 Thomas Street, over-head the tailoring establishment of Messrs. O'Donovan.

As already mentioned, the chief architect in the building of "Young Ireland" was Johnny

Sweeney, and associated with him in those early days were figures like Michael McInerney, Davis Street; James Fitzgerald, of Guinness's; Jack Murphy, who was a carpenter, of Mungret Street and a prominent footballer with Commercials; Pat Cowhey, who became first Secretary of the Club, and Jim Gleeson, who was later associated with some of the earlier moves to have a Gaelic Grounds in Limerick.

### MOST OF THEM GONE.

Unfortunately most of those associated with the founding of this famous club are long since dead and also, alas, many of the rank and file, who made up the playing strength of the club in its earliest days. Like the old club that has passed from the ranks of the Gael these past years and is so sadly missed by all genuine lovers of hurling, no matter their club affiliations, a roll call of the first members would now read all too like Austin Clarke's "Dead Men's List—Kelly and Bourke and Shea."

However, a few of the old associates of the founders still remain to gladden the retrospective eye and I hope that this short recital of some of the events of the now almost forgotten days will awaken happy memories in the breasts of the survivors of those long past hours. There was a kinship then which nothing could undermine—a kinship that was evident in much degree all down the years during which Young Ireland flourished, though I am afraid it will be hard for the present generation to understand. That kinship kept Young Ireland together through fifty years of struggle and strain and maybe will some day play a major part in bringing the old familiar colours of blue and gold back to its rightful place on the hurling field.

### TOWER OF STRENGTH AND INSPIRATION.

To know Johnny Sweeney was to know a great man in the really great sense of the term. Shy and unassuming and with the horror of the lime-light of public life, he felt himself ill-fitted for any of the public displays inseparable from the active work of furthering the national and Gaelic cause, and yet, to others engaged in the same sort of work he was the very tower of strength and inspiration.

He threw all his weight and organising ability behind the effort to establish Young Ireland as a great hurling club. Several members of the old Shamrocks Club returned to the game and joined the team, which achieved its ambition in 1902 by winning the County Senior Hurling title, a success that came again on six further occasions—1910, 1920, 1922, 1928, 1930 and 1932, to put the famed blue and gold colours at the head of the list as winners of the Limerick County hurling crown. That was twenty-two years ago—Ahane were just coming in for their record-breaking spell that brought fifteen titles, and left the Young Ireland figures well down on the list, but still in second place.

Young Ireland also won the Junior Hurling Championship title in 1921, and their many inter-county successes include the 1921 All-Ireland crown, the 1921, 1923 and 1933 Munster titles and the 1933 Thomond Feis.

### THE CLUB'S VICTORIES.

Johnny Sweeney helped the Blue and Gold win their two first titles—1902 and 1910. In the first round of the 1902 Championship, played at the Markets Field on August 24th, 1902, they had a great victory over the County champions, Castleconnell, 2-14 to 3-7. Mr. B. O'Rourke, Kildimo, refereeing. Next day out they played Pallasbeg, at Castleconnell (November 9th) and won 1-6 to 0-3. The County semi-final was played at Fedamore on April 5th, 1903, and resulted: Young Ireland, 5-11; Croom, 2-5, and then in the final, at the Markets Field on May 31st, 1903, the city lads beat Monegay, 2-9 to 0-5. Mr. Denis Spencer Lyons refereed and Young Ireland players were:

James Flanagan (captain), T. O'Brien, P. Maloney, T. Casey, T. Flynn, J. Connell, J. Creamer, M. Slattery, M. Kelly, C. Kelly, A. Kelly, P. O'Dea, J. Fitzgerald, M. Real, T. Brazil, M. Hogan, J. Sweeney.

The 1910 campaign opened on September 4th at the Markets Field where Young Irelands were leading Commercials, 4-2 to 4-1, when play was abandoned. The game was awarded to Young Irelands but they refused to accept it and agreed to a replay, which they won, 3-1 to 2-0. This was again played at the Markets Field—the date, February 5th, 1911. In the semi-final at the same venue, a fortnight later, the City men beat Croom, 5-4 to 1-0. On March 19th, 1911, they won their second title by beating Castleconnell, who were County and Munster title holders, 4-2 to 4-1, after a titanic struggle. The Young Ireland players on this occasion were:—Tom Hayes (captain), P. Scanlan (goal), M. Halvey, J. Ryan, J. Flanagan, J. Creamer, J. McNamara, P. Frawley, C. McGill, J. Brennan, J. Sweeney, T. McMahon, F. Murphy, T. O'Brien, J. Murphy.

### IN STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL FREEDOM.

The struggle for national freedom kept Johnny busily occupied in later years and he put all his energies to the work. Followed great days full of stimulating enthusiasm and high hopes. Life was worth living, and Ireland, cemented in its unity of purpose by the blood of the brave men of 1916, was a nation to feel proud of. In that unity of purpose, the nation marched from victory to victory amid the courageous suffering and sacrifices of the subsequent years, and Johnny Sweeney, though not of youthful years or robust constitution, faced the prison cell and the torture with the spirit of his race and knew no compromise where compromise meant the bartering of a principle.

To know him in those days of trial was to know a man whose conduct and personality were sufficient to strengthen one's faith in humanity and to learn how to suffer and be strong in fortitude. The unfortunate civil strife, with all its agonising experiences and the sun-down of so many fondly-cherished hopes, proved an awful blow, and Johnny Sweeney was among the many bitterly disappointed and heartsore, but he never lost faith in the cause of Irish nationality, and was steadfast in that faith up to the hour of his death.

### SINCERITY OF PURPOSE.

A great teacher of men has said that a man's real worth can be only measured in terms of character. Judged by that test Johnny Sweeney was a great man, if immense strength of character and sincerity of purpose. To hear him in discussions where a sharp difference of opinion prevailed was to see and hear a man who talked under the emotion of intense conviction, while denying no other man the right to the point of view expressed. He spoke little, but the little he felt it right to say was always marked with the weight of honest conviction. To him nothing mattered but truth and honesty, and in his actions and words Taylor's lines had apt application:

Fame is what you have taken,  
Character is what you give;  
When to this truth you waken  
Then you begin to live.

of October 1954