

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THERE was not from Malin Head to Cape Clear a more enthusiastic patron of Gaelic athletics than Father William Casey, the well-known pastor of Abbeyfeale, and no album of great Limerick athletes would be complete without a picture of one who worked so earnestly all his life for the advancement of our native games and language.

To my good friend, the late J. D. Hartnett of Abbeyfeale, that mine of information on everything connected with his native district, I am indebted for much of the material concerning Father Casey and old Gaelic days by the Feale.

Born at Castlequarter, Kilbenny, in the shade of the Galtees, in 1844, and ordained priest on July 22nd, 1868, he spent some time at Banogue, where the famous horse races were held in the long ago; and Manister, before moving permanently to Abbeyfeale on November 18th, 1871, and where he ministered until his death on December 29th, 1907.

Shortly after setting down in Abbeyfeale his activities opened with the establishment of a Temperance Society, a brass band which afterwards became famous in the Land League days, and an athletic club. The last mentioned was in a flourishing position years before that meeting in Thurles which established the the Gaelic Athletic Association.

The Temperance Society remained for many years the leading social sanctum of the town. It was a kind of happy family then, when motor cars and even bicycles were unknown. Those of the members who were not playing cards or draughts were nightly grouped about a big turf fire, and here on winter nights great events were recalled.

HOW HE SAVED THREE LIVES

Often re-told was the tale of the three lads from the town who were engaged ferreting rabbits in the Castle Inch when a great Feale flood surrounded them. No one could or would venture to save them until Father Casey, the daring young priest, who was not long in the place at the time, galloped to the spot and forced his horse into the flood at the risk of his life, and brought them out one by one in the nick of time.

Jack Scully was bandmaster of the Abbeyfeale Brass Band, which under Father Casey's patronage became famous. Jack was known to every Land League Committee in the Counties of Cork, Kerry and Limerick but was in his element when playing the local football team to some county match. There his music might help the Abbeyfeale boys to victory, or if fortune were inclined to snuff them it might at least have some paralysing effect on their opponents.

A MATCH WITH DOON.

One fine day in the late summer of 1891, the brass band, the football club and the usual muster of side line warriors and youthful aspirants to the colours of green and gold, were detrained from a special at Patrickswell Railway Station, and marshalled by Father Casey outside the platform beside a bridge, with pleasant instructions to face a march of five or six miles to Croom. There it was that a contest for the County football championship was fixed for decision between Abbeyfeale and Doon, the latter a fine set of strong limbed, hard faced, fearless looking men, who looked as if they might find it hard to return to a place so near Tipperary if they failed to snatch victory from the men of the west.

There was an immense crowd present when the teams lined up. Already Father Casey was busy along the side line, whip in hand, his tongue searching about his cheeks, a gesture to stimulate a sort of vexed impatience familiar to everyone who knew him, which helped more than the whip to keep a clear field, a task in which he was ably assisted by the good Gaels of Croom. The brass band sent out one or two old Irish airs over the field, and soon the game was in motion.

The opening exchanges were marked by some fine punts from the Doon centres, which a forward just failed to turn to account. A second rush was saved by some hefty arm strokes of the backs, then permitted, and for some minutes there was even play until the Feale men took the offensive. After ten minutes tense work, two Feale half-forwards introduced a dual pass movement, which just placed their top man in dangerous ground, when he was tripped by an opponent. This was the beginning of the end, for an appeal only invited further aggression, and immediately pandemonium reigned in a scene which fortunately has scarcely ever been repeated on a football field since. Better forget what happened, but the Doon men retreated to their waggonettes, and the game was awarded to Abbeyfeale, and subsequently confirmed.

YOUNG MEN OF FINE PHYSIQUE.

The life of the G.A.A. in West Limerick in those far-off days of the 'nineties throbbled in the county matches between Abbeyfeale and Templeglantine. Both teams presented a set of young men of such very fine physique that any country might well feel proud of. Athletic, virile, fearless, and invariably almost impossible to hurt in a match. There was seldom any need for substitutes and

it very rarely happened that play was suspended for the recovery of a player.

There was something to quicken the spirit of a young Gael then when Abbeyfeale and Templeglantine teams met. The contest was usually a strenuous one, and the balancing of accounts at the end of the season seldom showed any great disparity in the scoring between them. In those days when the venue was either at Abbeyfeale or Templeglantine one side of the field was kept well defined under Father Casey's methods for a clear field, when Conny Collins, of Kingsland, captained the local team. On the opposite side usually the respected Pastor of Templeglantine, the Rev. Father Clifford—the same who bred Kirkland, a Grand National winner, while afterwards Parish Priest of Monagea—plied his riding crop to good effect.

WHIP AND CROP BUSINESS.

Most of this whip and crop business was for the most part pretence on their part, but some such demonstrations were necessary where the pitches were unenclosed. Of course, whenever the 'Glantine supporters carried over the line by their enthusiasm, in the event of a score, that side-line would then be raked vigorously by Father Casey. This, then, meant extra work for Father Clifford, when appeals were lodged by aggrieved enthusiasts for reprisals in the shape of a dose of the same drug for the Abbeyfeale demonstrators. On the whole the proceedings were mostly good-humoured, and Father Casey would insist after a home venue on seeing that the visitors were played outside the town by the band, so as to lead the team followers away from the temptations that might find them playing the whole game over again in some local bar.

WHEN THEY BEAT CHAMPIONS OF KERRY.

In 1905, when Abbeyfeale challenged the champions of Kerry, Kilmoyley there was great amusement in the "Kingdom" at the considered audacity of the Limerickmen. Luckily, Abbeyfeale won the toss and played with the wind, scoring five points without reply in the first period of play. Still the Kerry boys were laughing, but the wind went down and a lovely calm was enjoyed during the last half, with the result that the champions of Kerry never made a score. Two old "Kingdom" women in Listowel that day were heard to express themselves thus: "Why should not the Abbeyfeale lads win when their own Father Casey kicked the ball into the field?" The other added: "Yes, and got the wind to stop blowing the last half time."

Father Casey had not the satisfaction of seeing his lads win the County Football Crown, although they reached the final in 1898, 1900 and 1904. However, the seed sown in those hectic days bore ample fruit in later times, and other men put the Fealeside in the topmost place on six separate occasions. Shortly before he died, however, Fr. Casey learned of the success of the Limerick football team that won the American Championship in 1907 and was thrilled to learn that nine Abbeyfeale men helped in the success, Denis O'Connell being captain of the side.

ELECTED CHAIRMAN OF CO. BOARD.

Prominently associated with the administrative side of Gaelic affairs for many years, the Gaels of Limerick eventually elected him Chairman of the County Board, a position he held with distinction until a short time before his lamented death at the early age of sixty-three. It was well remarked then, that though his mind was ever labouring for the spiritual, material and social elevation of the people as a whole, his heart, next to the faithful fulfilment of the sacred duties of his office, was with the "young blood" as he used to call them, the Gaels of the country. With them his word and presence were more powerful in critical moments on the hurling and football field than all other influences combined. To be amongst them made him young again; their victories swelled his heart with boyish enthusiasm, but none of his selection ever felt more despondent than he did when fortune smiled the other way.

FLUENT GAELIC SPEAKER.

A fluent Gaelic speaker, he took a keen interest in the language movement and was President of the West Limerick Coisde Ceann-tair in the infant days of the Gaelic League, as well as the most prominent figure at every Aeridheacht for many miles. Accompanied by another ardent supporter of the language, the late Very Rev. Father McNamara, C.S.S.R., Limerick, Father Casey at one such gathering, when telling of his proposed Temperance Hall in Abbeyfeale, stipulated that Gaelic classes should be held there. Father Casey later presided at the first Aeridheacht held beside the Temperance Hall but built, but which the Black and Tans burned down one morning, following a local ambush.

One of the pioneers of the G.A.A. in the county, Father Casey remained a tower of strength to the movement until the end. Often and often he expressed regret that the more strenuous and important fight for the land demanded a divided service from him at a time when his heart

was with the boys in hurling and football teams. For many years in his younger days his greatest delight was to be with the lads in active practice, where his virile activity demanded no concessions from the splendid teams he trained. He felt more pride in the victories which his football club secured in the early 'nineties than any trophy or honour bestowed on him during the distinguished work of his active patriotic life.

THE "PEOPLE'S FRIEND."

I will conclude with a few extracts from a newspaper tribute written shortly after his death: "The people's friend, the brave pure-souled champion of Ireland's rights, the zealous priest, the big hearted idol of the poor, the patriot priest of Abbeyfeale, is dead. Stung with grief, his parishioners mourn as for a loving father departed, one who entered into their every joy and sorrow, whose interests were his own, without class or distinction, who claimed no greater right to stand between the people and their troubles, the nation and its enemies, than the promptings of a great, generous, broad-hearted disposition, allied with a high toned Celtic nature which always chafed with subdued indignation at Ireland's helplessness in the hands of her enemies. His was a manifold character, not always thoroughly understood in detail by some who failed to trace occasionally his actions to the simple formulae of his life, which led his strength to the side of weakness, and with the

But it is as a patriot, as the oppressed.

"But it is as a patriot, as the combatant of Ireland's wrongs, and the fearless defender of her liberties that his reputation lives far beyond the humble parish of his ministry, in the remotest State of the great Western Republic, on the plains of the Southern Cross, and wherever an Irishman has found a home, his noble work and sacrifices in the ranks of the National movement are tenderly treasured in this dark hour by the exiles who took his kindly words of courage and advice to guide them when his exhortations failed to keep them where his heart would have them stay.

EVER READY TO SACRIFICE.

"As a prominent Nationalist leader and advocate of the people's rights the general public knew and appreciated his work, but the zealous self denying manner in which he performed his missionary labours was known only to his Divine Master, his parishioners, and those immediately associated with him in ministering to the spiritual needs of his flock. He never permitted a public obligation, and they were many and pressing, to detract him from his sacred duties. Ever ready for sacrifice, he did God's work as he would have his devoted people do it 'extraordinarily well,' and for the rest his philanthropy became proverbial. It is questionable whether Father Casey's patriotism exceeded his charity—both have become inseparably connected with his name. It may be said his left hand did not know what his right hand conferred, but this was only for a short time, because his generosity became a kind of public institution, and then with him concealment became impossible. He gave all he had, and he gave always and everywhere unconventionally; he listened to those who blamed him for encouraging vagrancy and vagabondism, but like the Great Master he sent none away, he rather somehow felt disappointed if no poor vagrants hung about the presbytery when the day's labours were done. The world's strays were ever God's creatures to him, and as one who knew Father Casey intimately remarked, Cardinal Manning's definition of a perfect priest was never more aptly applicable than to him, 'the flag of whose hall door was worn by the feet of the poor.'

DARED THE PRISON FOR HIS COUNTRY'S RIGHTS.

"And now the blow has fallen, the darkening cloud has settled down in gloomy shadow o'er the land; for Abbeyfeale its star is set, the patriot pastor, the only Father Casey his people knew, the stalwart breastwork, and their friend is gone. In many an Irish home to-night, whose roof-tree he upheld, the silent tear will fall, and the fervent prayer ascend for the noble heart who drove the rent thief, like the wolf, to lowlier lands; who truly fed the poor and solaced those in pain, who dared the prison for his people's rights and left his country better than he found it. It grieved him that her independence stayed so long, and that he had not lands to keep the fleeing populace at home. May God have mercy on his noble soul his people cry, and may his good deeds shine like stars with him in rest. He did his best, and left for other hands and better times a bright example and a clearer way to win his country's liberty and to slay her wrongs."

No. 79—Billie O'Donoghue of Mungret.