

No. 164—JOHNNY GUERIN of Knockaney

(By Seamus O'Ceallaigh)

ONE of the longest serving and most popular officials in Limerick Gaelic ranks was John A. Guerin, a founder member of the South Limerick Board as at present constituted, and an official of same for thirty years—the greatest span of an individual in the county records of the G.A.A.

Johnny Guerin came of great Gaelic stock—his father was a Gael in every fibre of his being—Nationalist in the best tradition, a member of the Fenian Brotherhood, an ardent advocate in the cause of Irish nationhood. He gave his allegiance to the G.A.A. from its foundation, and transmitted to his sons that love of native games that remained with them a life long passion.

Johnny, and his brother, Eddie, played hurling from an early age but the opportunities for youthful wielders of the caman were few and far between at the time. Nevertheless, Johnny figured in many interesting hurling encounters and was a member of the Bruff team that won the Granagh Tournament in 1917. Hurling was strong in the south at the period, but Ireland was in the throes of the Fight for Independence and the Guerins, like many another son of the soil, left no doubt as to where their allegiance lay.

Johnny, by occupation a land surveyor, remained in the old homestead at Knockaney, but Eddie qualified as a teacher and stretched a brilliant hurling career over three counties—Limerick, Waterford and Laois, finally settling in Borris-in-Ossory where, when his hurling days were over, he helped to train many successful teams.

HIS FAVOURITE PASTIMES.

Hurling, and a bit of handball were Johnny's favourite pastimes, and he was still on the active list when he accepted the chairmanship of the South Limerick Board on June 4th, 1922, when it was formed following efforts, in which Johnny figured prominently, to get matters Gaelic on a firm footing in the area.

The first attempt at organisation in the South was made in May of 1914, when a hurling and football league committee was formed, with Mr. Willie Naughton of Bruff as chairman and Mr. William Drake of Kilmnane as secretary. The difficulties of World War One stifled that brave effort. A revival was attempted in August 1919, when Mr. D. O'Connell of Ardpatrick occupied the chair, and Mr. Joseph Sheedy of Kilmallock was secretary. The Black and Tans killed that move.

The other officers of the 1922 venture were: E. Jackson, Kilmallock, vice-chairman; G. V. McSwiney, Hospital, treasurer, and Joseph Sheedy, Kilmallock, secretary. Civil War soon stepped in, and the fate of the third attempt looked sealed.

Johnny Guerin, however, was nothing if not a "sticker." By precept and example, he helped to heal the wounds left by internecine strife, and the better to achieve this resigned his position as chairman, and occupied the vice-chair for a few seasons—Rev. Father Ryan, C.C., Bruree, and later, Rev. Father Moriarty, C.C., Bruff, acting as chairmen in those years.

BACK AT THE HELM IN 1927.

By 1927 Johnny was back at the helm, and the South Limerick Board on a firm footing. Many great workers served under the wise guidance of the Knockaney enthusiast, including: D. O'Grady, James Godfrey (Kilmallock), Tommy Woods, Jim Walsh, (Hospital), John Lucey (Kilmnane), J. Mulcahy (Bruff), P. Crowe, P.

O'Connell (Knocklong) — right down to the present fine team, who have accomplished so much for the games in the division.

An opponent of British Imperialism as an administrator, Johnny was a very capable referee, handling some important games over a lengthy spell.

An opponent of British Imperialism almost from his cradle days, he was a staunch advocate of the retention of the ban on foreign games, in support of which he spoke at almost every convention of the South Limerick Board during his thirty years close association with that body. It was his firm conviction that the ban should remain whilst any vestige of British rule or influence existed in any portion of his native land, and this gospel he preached consistently, resisting vigorously any attempt suggestive of compromise or expediency.

ATTITUDE TO ATHLETICS.

Fully conscious of the proud place South Limerick held in the early G.A.A. days, as the home of some of the greatest athletes the world has known, he lost no opportunity of stressing this fact and deploring the decline that has set in during the present century. He blamed the advent of the cinema and the dance hall for weaning the youth away from the athletic fields, and often recalled the days of his youth when it was commonplace to see young men in the fields practising athletics.

An idealist at heart, Johnny Guerin upheld the ideals of the Association to the very last. He always stressed this aspect, as can be judged from this extract from one of his many addresses:

"You all know how the Gaelic games should be played. They should be played in a true and sporting manner. I am saying that every year but still we have a little friction now and again but we get over it. We are custodians of our great games — our native pastimes—custodians of the tradition that has handed them down to us through the years despite opposition—and it is up to us to keep them going, to keep alive the spirit that has lived in conjunction with these games from time immemorial. Even with the coming of foreign games — and you know how they came in — Gaelic games have been the greatest games imbued with the spirit of the Gael."

CRIME TO HOLD A HURLEY!

"At one time it was a crime to have a hurley in your hand or a Gaelic football to kick, but still our predecessors kept the games going in spite of trouble or opposition. The officers of the Board or Boards throughout the country are, I might say, only the figure-heads and it depends on you, the delegates and players, to keep the games going and we are grieved at anything that might occur on the playing field that might not be in accordance with our great tradition."

I well remember my first meeting with Johnny. I think it was early 1924, and Limerick were to play Dublin at Rathcroghan Feis. It was a long run from the Treaty City, and the entire party left on the Saturday evening, breaking the journey at Athenry.

Travelling short a number of the usual championship fifteen, including such stars as Willie Gleeson, Jimmie Humphries, Mick Neville, Willie Hough and Willie Ryan, the party included thirteen players drawn from the city area, together with Jack Keane of Castleconnell and Jack Hanley of Bruff. Johnny Guerin accompanied the latter.

If I remember aright the City contingent was: Paddy McInerney, Denny Lanigan, Bob McConkey, Jerry Markham, Paddy Hartigan, Jack O'Shea, Willie Hurley, Jimmy Fitzgerald—all of Young

Ireland's, with "Twager" O'Grady, Tom McGrath, "Padjo" Daly, Micky Cross and John Joe Kinnane of Cloughaun.

A GREAT GAME.

It was a great game, which Limerick won, 4-0 to 2-4. Jack Hanley played remarkably "between the sticks" and cleared almost impossible shots. At the other end, the late Dr. Tommie Daly was unable to reach the crossbar, which was placed well above the usual height. Thus a few of the goals were secured nicely out of the reach of that famous cul-baire. Often we spoke of that day after.

Before the match commenced the Limerick players and a few of their supporters went on the field for a "pipe-opener." The pitch, only laid out specially for the day's play, was on a famous height renowned in local history.

Johnny Guerin had possession of the hurling ball and was the first to strike it into the group of Limerick lads seeking "a few pucks." Imagine his delight a little later when he was informed that he had struck the first hurling ball in these parts since the days of Cuchulain.

That was an honour not to be taken lightly by a man who placed such a value on tradition.

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