

No. 183—J. K. BRACKEN of Kilmallock

THE members of the Central Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association attended a special Mass in St. Francis Xavier's Church, Gardiner Street, Dublin, on Sunday last, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the deaths of the three founder members of the Association—Michael Cusack, Michael Davitt and Joseph K. Bracken.

Two of the trio—Cusack and Bracken—were included in the seven men who attended the historic meeting in Thurles on November 1st, 1884, at which it was decided to form the Gaelic Athletic Association.

Michael Davitt was unable to attend that meeting, but a long letter was read from him on the occasion, promising his wholehearted support, a promise that he more than fulfilled in the years that followed.

DEFINITE NATIONAL BIAS.

The G.A.A. had a definite national bias from the start—a circumstance that did not come by accident. It represented the unashamedly national, and on these lines they were determined the Association would develop.

A little knowledge of the background to the actual foundation will be helpful in understanding the atmosphere in which the G.A.A. was conceived and spent its formative years.

Some think the G.A.A. was a "brain wave" of Michael Cusack and that he immediately issued the circular calling the foundation meeting.

This is far from the case. In actual fact, the idea of a National Athletic Association was in the minds of leading political figures like Thomas Francis Meagher, James Stephens, John O'Mahony, P. W. Nally and others for many years prior to the actual coming into being of the G.A.A.

INTEREST OF I.R.B.

Five years before the eventual meeting date, the Supreme Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood agreed to take the necessary steps to bring an organisation into being for the revival of Irish games and athletics.

Many will wonder what interest the I.R.B. had in such a project, and a little explanation will be necessary.

Following the failure of the '67 Rising, it was agreed by many of the leaders of the movement that another attempt at rebellion had little hope of success. Many former believers in physical force as the only means of winning national independence had gone over to constitutionalism.

And in the spread of the land movement the Fenian Chiefs saw the danger of the turning of young men's minds towards agrarian rather than political revolution.

The I.R.B. was a secret and oath bound society, suppressed by the British. It could not openly organise or be associated with any new organisation, without grave risk of seeing it killed in its infancy.

WILLED THE G.A.A. INTO EXISTENCE.

The I.R.B. willed the G.A.A. into existence, but having done so it was left to others to act as sponsors.

Michael Cusack, a trusted member of the I.R.B., but whose association with the organisation was unknown except to a very few, was given the job of launching the project.

The ground was well prepared beforehand—leading national figures were canvassed, and although only a mere handful, seven in all, were present at the first meeting that put the G.A.A. in motion, powerful influences in support were working behind the scenes.

Within a week of the Thurles meeting every branch of the I.R.B. had been instructed to rally to the standard of the new association, as the only course left by which the interest of the youth could be retained.

The G.A.A. was directed into the previously arranged channel—separatist in outlook, national in its general aims, yet broad enough in essential appeal to attract to membership many who would never otherwise get the benefit of the discipline and leadership it offered.

VIOLENT OPPOSITION.

—Violent opposition to the infant G.A.A. from all the anti-national elements, then so strong in Ireland, just played into the hands of the new organisation, which soon had enrolled under its banner all the nationally minded men in the country.

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

Of the three founders the half-century of whose death was commemorated last Saturday, least known to present day Gaels would be Joseph Kevin A. Bracken, who died at his home, Ardullen House, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick, in May, 1906.

Yet J. K. Bracken was very prominent in the early G.A.A. days, and when Maurice Davin became first President of the Association, "J.K." was elected its Vice-President, Michael Cusack filling the post of Secretary.

All through the stormy initial years J. K. Bracken, wielded a strong influence on the Executive, which was composed of stout hearted men, who welded in very short time an army of clubs and individuals to a well disciplined force.

THE DIVISION INTO COUNTY UNITS.

When the growing strength of the Organisation demanded the division into county units, for the better government of the Association, J. K. Bracken played a big part in putting Tipperary into shape—work that was recognised by his appointment as first Chairman of Tipperary County Board.

J. K. Bracken was a son of the soil, who came from good farming stock. He married a Tipperary lady—Miss Hannah Ryan of Borrisoleigh—and the pair made their first home in Templemore, where Mrs. Bracken made history by becoming the first woman chairman of an Irish public body, Templemore U.C.D.

The family later moved to Tipperary Town, where "J.K." set up business as a stone cutter, establishing the "monumental works" in St. Michael's Street, from which he supplied many public memorials, particularly around the centenary year of the Insurrection of 1798.

Mr. Bracken then founded what later became a very thriving building contracting business, coming to reside at Ardullen House, Kilmallock, from which he directed work in many parts of Munster.

A STERLING NATIONALIST.

Old Kilmallock residents still remember him as a sterling nationalist, deeply interested in the

affairs of the G.A.A. even years after his active days with the organisation were over; and a man that was all the time prominent in the politics of his time.

The physical force men had a friend in him at all times, and whilst admitting that other men were entitled to support in trying more peaceful methods he could never be convinced that anything would dislodge British power and influence in Ireland, only its overthrow by force of arms.

He delighted in the powerful influence the G.A.A. had become in a short spell and always tried to keep it true to the nationalist and separatist traditions of its founders.

When he died suddenly in May, 1906, at Kilmallock, J. K. Bracken left three sons and a daughter, Nancy.

The latter was married in Wicklow, where I met her on a few occasions. She died there about twelve months ago.

Of the three sons, one was Garda Superintendent in Galway for a number of years before going abroad; another died in a Jesuit Scholasticate in Australia. The third, Brendan, was only five when his father died.

Brendan, notable for his shock of vivid red hair, was educated at Mungret and Belvedere Colleges before going to Australia under the care of his step-uncle, an Augustinian priest.

BECAME MINISTER UNDER CHURCHILL.

About thirty-five years ago he returned to reside in London; in 1929 he was elected Conservative M.P. for North Paddington, and during the war years acted as Minister of Information in the Churchill Government.

Now, Brendan Bracken is the owner of one of London's two leading financial daily newspapers. He is editor of "The Banker," managing director of "The Economist" and a director of one of Britain's leading printing and publishing houses.

He has not been in Ireland since he attended the funeral of his mother at Borrisoleigh in 1928. Some years ago, when I wrote him for data concerning his father, he replied: "I was very interested by the particulars you gave me of my father's part in founding the G.A.A., but as he died when I was a child of five, I cannot give you any recollection of him. I wish I could."

Kilmallock can be proud of its connection with one of the seven men that established the G.A.A., and now that the town has raised a worthy Gaelic Park some monument should be placed there to remind patrons of a man who played such a big part in founding and developing the Association.