

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 35)—William Drake of Kilfinane

(By SBAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

LIMERICK, one of the earliest counties to rally to the G.A.A. after its foundation in 1884, produced many brilliant sons whose names are household words where ever Gaels meet.

The subject of my sketch this week—the late William Drake, of Kilfinane, had a remarkable knowledge of the brilliant men that made the athletic welkin ring during those memorable days, and he gave me much valuable information concerning many of the lesser known figures, who, nevertheless, played no mean part in placing the name of Limerick foremost at a time when the Irish athletic arena was thronged with wonderful performers that were fit to grace even an Olympic gathering.

These men deserve to be remembered every bit as much as the great stars whose careers we have touched in the course of these reviews. In recalling the memory of William Drake, it may be opportune to mention some little of the information he supplied me with concerning the lads, who, by their worth in competition, and presence at the various meetings of their time, forced the best from the champions and provided the public with the sport that kept interest and enthusiasm at the highest pitch.

KILFINANE DISTRICT HAD GREAT WEALTH OF ATHLETIC TALENT.

In the youthful days of the athletic revival it is doubtful if any parish in Ireland could claim the talent that Kilfinane boasted. In that wonderful district we find Dan Shanahan, John Flanagan, Denis Carey, Michael Connery, who jumped 23ft. 10ins. across a sunken road; John Connery and Jack McCarthy, all born close to each other, and at school together. Shanahan, the two Connerys, and Jack McCarthy were members of the Gaelic team that "invaded" America in 1888. Other famous Kilfinane athletes of that era were Harry Tracey, often referred to as the fountain head and alma mater of Kilfinane athletes, whose death saw the last of the foot racing on the old lines; shopkeeper Henry Henchy, noted two mile walkist of the 'eighties; John Schumaker, of Ballygriggan, also a prize winner of the same period in the 2 mile walk; Joe Touchstone and Dan Cowmey. And it was the same parish that brought to Limerick its first All-Ireland hurling title, when in 1897, the far-famed Kilkenny champions, Tullaroan, failed to stop their victory march.

Two Kilfinane men, Will Cronin and Jer. Coomey, were frequent antagonists for the mile; and William Drake often spoke of the occasion when he witnessed the unusual spectacle of those two men tying on two occasions the same day at Kilmallock in a mile race. As neither would give in or toss for first prize, they fought it out twice with the result—a tie.

The Flynn family, of Clovers, Kilfinane, were of sterling athletic worth. Paddy Flynn, one of the All-Ireland champion hurlers of 1897, was also an all round athlete of good calibre. His brother, David, known as "The Mighty Atom," who stood barely five feet high, could well negotiate a pole vault of ten feet, and a long jump of twenty-one feet. This man was a prodigy for his inches.

P. Keane, also of Clovers, was a good distance runner with rare staying powers and proved his worth in many a hard fought struggle at all the local sports for many years.

DISTANCE RUNNERS OF WIDESPREAD FAME.

The brothers Keefe, of Ballyorgan, Will and Frank, were distance runners of widespread fame. Both were farm labourers and their opportunities for training were very meagre indeed. Will ran into third place at the G.A.A. All-Ireland Championship meeting, a two day gathering, at Tralee, on July 31st and August 1st, 1887. A fortnight later he won the same event—the one mile flat, from

scratch, at Kilmallock Sports. Two years later he went to America and won many prizes there.

His best performance, however, was at Ballylanders Sports, in a mile race and off the 10 yards mark, when he gave J. J. Manning of Galway the race of his life. Manning won by inches on the tape (time, 4m. 37 secs. on a sodden field) and freely admitted that it was one of the hardest races of his career. The Galway man was a champion many times over ere he left Ireland. This he did soon after the race I mention, going to Australia, where he turned professional runner, making many new records in the land of his adoption, and I believe a good deal of money also.

Will Ryan, of Laurecetown, was a sprinter of good repute. Equipped with the spirit and will to win, and a good turn of speed, he captured many prizes before he too, emigrated to Australia, while yet in his youth.

FIRST OF THE LAP SYSTEM.

The coarse fields saw the first of the lap system of athletics, when John T. O'Regan, (Martinstown) of the Bog, a grand miler, later a draper in Cork, negotiated the first open mile against "black" Ned Tobin from Glenbrohane; Will Cronin, a cooper of Ballyroe, a good "half," and trainer of the celebrated Will Ryan, mentioned earlier, who could do a flying "quarter"; and Mike Duggan, of Cush. The Roaster Lane opened fire with the weights, smashing records with a vengeance, to disappear after a short span, a sort of butterfly existence, but making way for Pat F. Lipsett, who was prominent in the infant days of the G.A.A., and had a notable achievement to his credit at the L.A.A. & B.C. Sports of 16th June, 1885, when he beat the famous J. S. Mitchell, of Emly, in two events—putting 16lb at 40ft. 11ins., and the 16lb. hammer at 139ft. 7ins. His best performance at putting the 28lbs. was scored at Newcastle West sports on September 8th, 1886, the distance 29ft. 11ins.

Before going on to consider Mr. Drake's own career, I must find space to include the names of other fine athletic figures from the Kilfinane district in Tom Howard, of Ballintubber, one of the fathers of cross country running; Patrick T. Lee, late of Cappamore, a great sprinter from the "100" to the "440" during the years 1890-7; John J. Hennessy, who specialised in the long runs, from a mile to five and flourished during the 1908 to 1912 period; the Ballinvana pair, Tim Higgins and John Flynn, to the front at the long jump and hop, step and jump in the closing years of the last century; and last, but by no means least, Con Ryan, of Ballinvheena, who was prominent in the middle distance events nearly fifty years ago.

WILLIAM DRAKE'S ATHLETIC CAREER.

Like many another good worker in the cause of the Gael, William Drake was more successful as an organiser than during his years on the active service list, and he can boast much solid achievement during his long years as Secretary of the famous Kilfinane Hurling Club, and as the leading figure behind the running of some of the most successful athletic sports meetings held anywhere.

Born in Kilfinane in 1876, he began his athletic career seventeen years later, when, at Kilmallock sports, held on All Saints Day, 1893, he tied from scratch with J. Byrne of Dromin, for second place in the running high jump event.

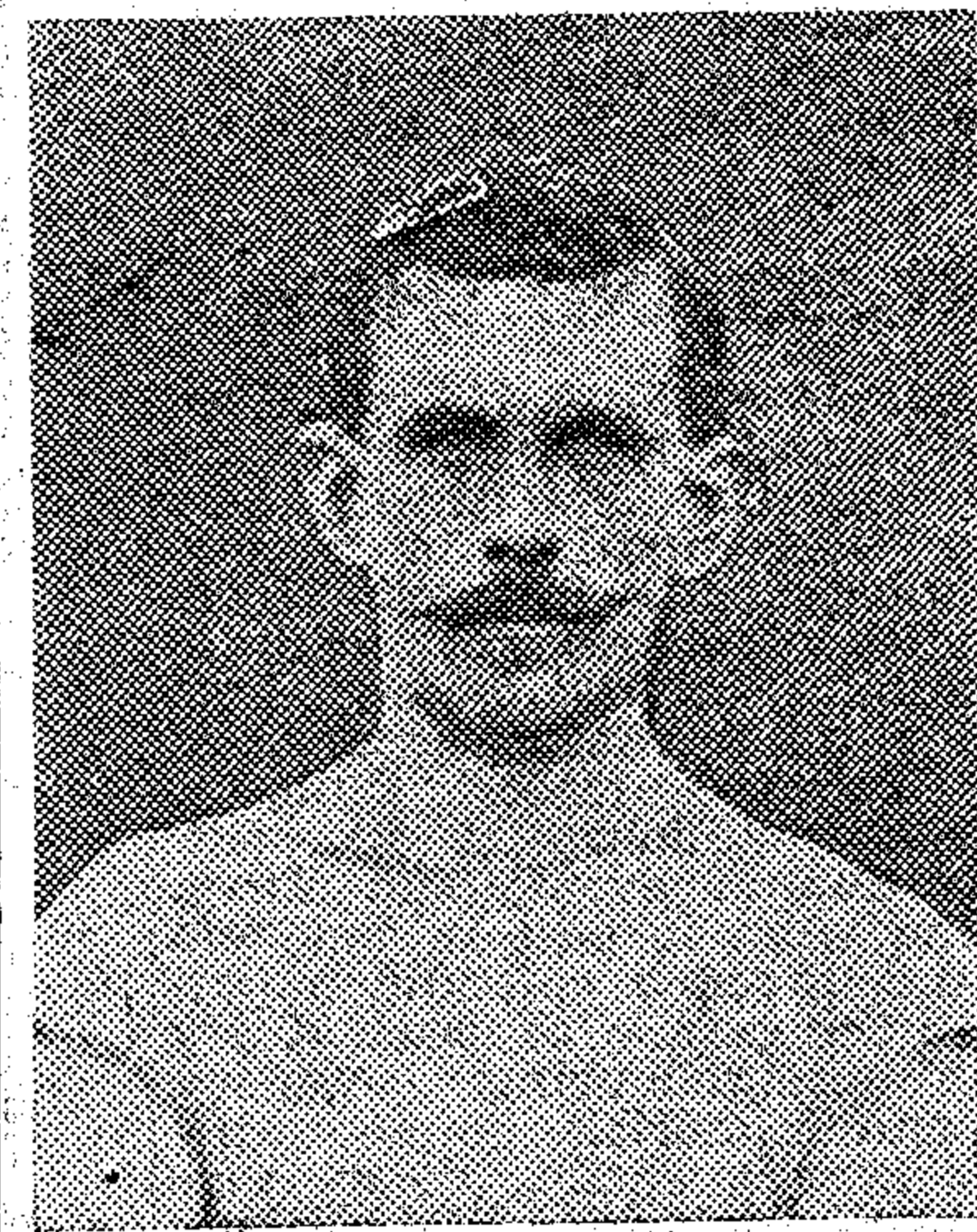
His first appearance on native

heath was at the Kilfinane sports, held on 15th August, 1895. On that occasion he was second in the high jump at 5ft. 3ins. A year later—8th August, 1896, to be precise—he covered an extra 1 1/2 ins. at the same meeting to win the event.

Drake did not compete in the three following seasons, during which period Paddy Leahy made jumping history, so we next make acquaintance with the Kilfinane man at Bruff sports in October, 1900, where he secured first place in the pole jump, with an effort of 9ft. 6ins.

OTHER PERFORMANCES.

The next year, 1901, he was second in the high jump at Kilmallock, with a leap of 5ft. 6ins., and in October again won the pole jump event at Bruff, the figure on this occasion being 9ft. 4ins. On August 15th, 1902, at Kilfinane, J. Blackburn, of Galbally, tied with him for premier honours at 10 feet, also in the pole jump, to which event he now confined his atten-



The Late William Drake.

tions and notched amongst others the following successes in the ensuing years.

Rathluirc, September, 1902, second at 9 ft. 7 ins.; Bruff, July, 1903, second at 9 ft. 8 ins.; Galbally, 20th September, 1903, won at 9 ft. 6 ins.; Bruree, July, 1904, second at 9 ft. 7 ins.; Bruff, 1904, won at 9 ft. 6 ins.; Kilfinane, August 15th, 1904, second at 9 ft. 5 ins.; Elton, August, 1904, won at 9 ft. 7 ins.; Limerick, September 18th, 1904, second at 9 ft. 7 ins.; Galbally, September 25th, 1904, won at 9 ft. 9 ins.; Kilfinane, August 13th, 1905, won at 10 ft. 1 in.; Mallow, August 15th, 1905, won at 9 ft. 6 ins.; Kilfinane, June 14th, 1906, won at 9 ft. 9 ins.; Kilfinane, August, 1907, second at 9 ft. 9 ins.; Dromcollogher, September, 1907, second at 9 ft. 8 ins.

CONNECTION WITH THE G.A.A.

William Drake retired from active participation in athletics after 1907, but retained his connection with the Gaelic Athletic Association as Secretary of the Kilfinane Hurling Club, a position which he filled with marked success from 1906 to 1915. During the same period he acted in a like capacity to many Kilfinane athletic sports meetings.

For many years following 1915 William Drake resided in Limerick, where he continued to take a very keen interest in the G.A.A. and its games.

I always found him one of the leading authorities on all the big men of his time, and he had a remarkable memory for the "smaller fry," and always maintained that

they should not be forgotten.

WHAT HE THOUGHT OF PADDY RYAN.

And I think I can conclude this little sketch no better than to quote a final tit-bit from William Drake, in reminiscent mood, this dealing with a famous Pallasgreen figure still happily with us:—

"Paddy Ryan threw the 16 lbs. hammer with such ease, and could revolve while doing that triple turn with such speed, that it was nothing less than amazing."

"Pat Ryan's worth as a weight thrower was never estimated high enough. I never saw a man in the ring with a hammer in his hand that could use himself to such advantage as he could. Somehow or other he was built differently to any of them. He was my idol of what a perfect specimen of weight thrower should be. While Flanagan was a runner and jumper to be reckoned with in his early days as an athlete, he was built symmetrically as a weight thrower; yet he lacked the height that Paddy Ryan had, and he could never utilise the space within the 7-foot circle as Ryan used to."

No. 36—Jim Condon of Lough Gur.