

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 62)—MICK MALONE of South Liberties

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

WHEN considering the career of Malachi O'Brien a week ago, we were carried back to pre-G.A.A. days in order to trace the rise of the famed Commercial. The great county finals at Croom that sent the footballers to the winning of the first ever All-Ireland final, saw South Liberties also to the fore in one of the most exciting county hurling deciders of all time.

Whilst the football glories of those early days are still fresh in our memories, it might be no harm to have a look at the other side of the picture, to discover that hurling was also strong in Limerick for some years before the seven men sat down around a hotel table in Thurles and brought the G.A.A. into being.

The G.A.A. in its infancy met with much opposition and was buffeted by many storms, and, in addition to obstacles from without met with considerable trouble from different elements comprising the early membership.

It is not my intention to go fishing at present in deep and muddy waters, so I will confine my examination of the situation that prevented South Liberties following their football brothers along the road to All-Ireland renown, to some recollections of the late James P. Rahilly dealing with events of that long ago period, and with which he was fairly intimately connected.

SEVENTY YEARS AGO.

As Mr. Rahilly throws much valuable light on events in Limerick prior to the founding of the G.A.A., I cannot resist the temptation of quoting him, as a kind of an introduction, as it were, to the uprise of the "Liberties" and of the gallant lads who numbered Mick Malone, one of the star defenders of a team that must always hold an honoured place in Limerick hurling history.

Seventy years ago next May, the South Liberties were established, and to James P. Rahilly went the honour of being the first member enrolled. When we discussed the early struggles to get the games of the Gael on a firm foundation in Limerick, the old veteran had to bridge a gap of more than half a century in order to give as faithful a picture as possible of the events of that memorable time.

In order to complete the canvas it was necessary for him to make use of traditional knowledge acquired from the outgoing generation, at the time, as he put it himself, "when we were boys." And even when dealing with matters of his own time, he was careful to warn me that owing to the distance of time any possible errors or discrepancies from other accounts of the period may be considered in the light of the mistakes which can surely be attributed to long years and fleeting memory.

THE STORY.

And here now is the story as I got it.

"For a start it may be mentioned that although hurling is so ancient that it is difficult to trace its origin, there seems no evidence to show that earlier than the 'eighties it had been governed by any rules that would equalise the chances of competitions in what afterwards became such a skilful test. Previously the only means of deciding competitive superiority were the challenges of parishes or districts, and then, without adequate regard for equalising the number of opponents or even providing proper

The most popular form of competition was what was called "At Home," when the contestants met in some central place between their respective home districts and the struggle began and continued until the ball was brought "home" or the mantle of darkness signalled "time up." Other goaling objectives were distant land marks.

"The method often employed in hurling contests which led to the development of scientific skill was when the practitioners met in

"puck about," and two of the leading players would stand out and call man for man alternatively to their respective sides until the number present was exhausted, when improvised "goals" were erected and a clash begun with as much determination as the final of a county championship to-day.

AN EARLY CHALLENGE MATCH.

"Here it may be of interest to relate the earliest challenge match played by South Liberties. It would now be well over a hundred years since the hurlers of North Cork sent a challenge to a young man named Donovan who lived in our district, to play an "all home." Donovan, who was famous for wielding the caman, called his forces together and, the challenge being accepted, they travelled practically all night for the town of Rathkeale, near where the ball was put rolling in a place known as "The Commons." The struggle began, and continued until darkness obscured the ball in the vicinity of sweet Adare, which, being some three miles nearer the Liberties' "home," left them the victors by that margin.

"Shortly afterwards the victorious contingent decided to have a test between themselves, when Michael Sheedy of Ballysheedy and John Fitzgerald of Rosbrien House—two outstanding men—selected, respectively, the opposing teams, and the determined struggle that took place is handed down as the outstanding exhibition of the time in this district.

THE "SHAMROCKS" CLUB.

"Henceforward hurling took such a hold in the South Liberties of Limerick that enthusiasts from the City began to patronise the locality. This subsequently led to the formation of a club which they called "Shamrocks," composed of members from the City and Liberties. The very popular Tom Guina of the G.P.O. was made captain, a well deserved honour, for Tom was one of the first, if not the first, to pioneer the pastime in Limerick City.

"The same year, 1832, St. Michael's Temperance Society formed their club, and when both had reached a satisfactory stage of advancement, a challenge was issued and the teams met at Rosbrien, where, after the most exciting contest known up to then, the match ended in a draw.

St. Michael's team was captained by the late Michael Joyce, afterwards Mayor of the City, and its highly respected member of Parliament. A point I am glad to be able to vouch for here is that, although competitions brought all clubs, inside and outside the city, into sporting conflict in those bygone days, there were no warmer friends afterwards than the survivors of the old clubs.

A CHALLENGE FROM NORTH TIPPERARY.

"The re-play between St. Michael's and Shamrocks, took place in the Island Field, and resulted in victory for the Shamrocks, which led to their being challenged by Kincoora, who hailed from North Tipperary. The challenge was accepted and the match played at Ballina, where Kincoora won. The return game, played at Rosbrien in March, 1834, saw Kincoora repeat the victory. The multitude that followed the teams from the City to the field on that occasion constituted a sight that never could be forgotten. Marching in their club colours, they were headed by the Boherbuoy Band, champions of Ireland at the time, and a splendid fife and drum band from Tipperary.

"I was present at the match, which was very vigorously, but honourably contested. Excitement ran to fever heat, and the enthusiasm created what may be called the hurling epidemic. The result was that existing clubs could not provide places on their teams for all the prospective players, with the result that some members

broke away, and formed new clubs, which were started all over the city and in some parts of the county.

FORMATION OF SOUTH LIBERTIES CLUB.

"In May of that year, the South Liberties formed their Club, when Jack Malone, one of the most popular players of the Shamrocks, was made captain, and it is no exaggeration to say that no more capable leader, or warmer favourite ever came before the sporting public, or took with him such cherished tributes from those with whom he came in sporting conflict.

"Remember all this took place before the founding of the G.A.A., and the activity in Limerick at this period probably explains the leading part played by the men of Sarsfield's county in the early days of the Association.

"On November 1st the G.A.A. was formed at a meeting in Thurles, and soon the new movement swept the country like a prairie fire. Affiliations began in 1835 and tournaments were started in many places, as well as athletic sports. The hurling rules were very peculiar in those early days and the different devices used to take the best advantage of them, gradually led to their revision.

"It will be of interest to recall that, at the outset there were in the city of Limerick alone at least seventeen hurling clubs—St. Michael's, Shamrocks, St. Mary's, Treaty Stone, Carmen, Clan-na-Gael, St. John's, Wolf Tones, Sarsfields, Henry Grattan's, League of the Cross, O'Connells, Smith O'Brien's, Glencore, Lord Edwards, Slashers and South Liberties, the latter then regarded a city club.

TWO GREAT HURLERS.

"Whenever Gaels foregather, and early South Liberty days are discussed, two names are surely mentioned—Johnny Connell and Mick Malone, and only a crank will deny that they were two of the most prominent Limerick hurlers of their day. Mick Malone had not the versatility of Connell, but he was one of the greatest of Limerick defenders and had he flourished in later years he would surely have made a name for himself in the inter-county arena.

"To the opposing team it seemed that the tortured ball sought to rest on his hurley. Forwards flung themselves against a human rock, and forgot their bruises in the bitterness of their despair.

"Hurling was second nature to Mick, and a Liberties team without him was only half a team. His judgment was uncanny. He could sense a forward's movements and proceed to outplay him by brains rather than brawn. And he could turn on his tracks like a hare. We had some wonderful defenders in those days—I am thinking of so wistfully, but Mick Malone was the daddy of them all. He would break any opposing team's heart. They might have three-quarters of the game but Mick Malone always blocked the way to the goal. He was the pillar of the game in the "Liberties". A hurler from his cradle days he played with head and hand in unison. His command of falling balls and his mighty length of puck were two of the many memories he left at the end of a great career.

HECTIC ENCOUNTERS.

"Tournament and challenge games kept teams busy from 1835 onwards, and South Liberties figured in some hectic encounters. They met in one of their earliest outings under Gaelic laws a team with which they were later on to make history—the renowned Murroe men. After two meetings of these sides the issue remained undecided. In the Klimurly Tournament final "Liberties" encountered a very crack team in Castleconnell, and after one of the finest matches of the time they came through victorious by a close margin. They got one big take down, when St. Michael's, then at the pinnacle

of their glory, beat them at Fedamore. The sides met later on in a tournament final at the Fair Green when "Liberties" succeeded in turning the tables.

"In order to make arrangements for the first championships, County Boards were formed, but these, like the Association in general, certainly had their growing pains and some bad bungling culminated in the differences of opinion producing two rival boards in Limerick, which put the clubs into different camps.

"In order to test supremacy for County honours it was arranged that both groups of the divided Council would, under their respective leaders, try out their separate issues, and the victors in each play off. This resulted in the South Liberties being returned the winners under the "old" or O'Brien Board, and Murroe, winners under the "new" or Fr. Sheehy Board.

THE COUNTY FINAL.

"The two teams had now to meet for the County final, and the coming together of two such famous rivals under all the conflicting circumstances created excitement bordering on the sensational. The match was fixed for Croom, and owing to the amount of casualties associated with the previous matches played by the teams, elaborate precautions were taken to ensure that the game would be fought in strict accordance with the rules. The Central Council sent along John Cullinane, of Bansa, who was a power in himself, to act as referee.

"Under a blazing mid-day sun both teams lined out—the Murroe men, all wearing sparkling white shirts, looked as fine a picture of manhood as one could wish to see, while the South Liberties, wearing green and gold jerseys, although a much lighter team, did not take from the beauty of the picture which the dazzling sun left sparkling before the eager multitude, the dimensions of which may be gauged by mentioning that six special trains arrived in Croom from Limerick that day.

"Were it not for the capital device adopted by the orderlies on the field in directing the first five lines of spectators to lie, kneel or sit down, half the people could not see the play. Very Rev. T. Halpin, P.P., Donoughmore, who accompanied the Liberties, mounted on horseback, paraded up and down the margin between players and spectators on one side of the field and the Rev. Fr. Sheehy, who led the Murroe team on to the field, occupied a similar position on foot at the other side.

THRILL FOLLOWED THRILL.

"When the ball was set in motion, everybody forgot everything else except to watch its lightning speed amidst a furious onslaught. From the outset thrill followed thrill, the ball frequently travelling from end to end of the pitch without touching the ground, and players flinging themselves against each other like battering rams, while the clashing of ash sounded like a battle charge.

"The spectators were kept spellbound in this game of games, and the half-time whistle finding both teams as they started—no score—helped to create additional excitement for the second spell. When play was resumed it soon became evident that determination to achieve victory led to a keenness that called for the intervention of the referee, whose commanding influence obliged both teams to understand that they should "play the game," and from that onward he had only to watch the ball.

"The play kept growing fast and furious, while anxiety on the part of the spectators kept increasing with the fast passing time. Ten minutes to go, and the ball dashing from goal to goal but no score! With excitement intense and some of the more anxious spectators practically in a state of collapse, the fortunes of war favoured the green and gold. Johnny Connell got possession, and like lightning passed to Con Sheehan, who, with a marvellous shot from a very awkward angle scored a point, amidst a frantic outburst of cheering and a scene which is beyond description.

MICK MALONE'S INSPIRING WORK.

"When the excitement subsided play was resumed, and with only eight minutes left Murroe naturally made superhuman efforts to score. It was here that Mick Malone was seen at his greatest, and his inspiring work rallied the Liberty backs to such determination that the Murroe forwards just found it was as much as their life was worth to attempt to break through the forest of ash that guarded the "Liberties" goal. Minute after minute passed as the excitement mounted and when, at last, the referee's whistle sounded, it was the signal not alone of victory for the Liberties, but also for a scene of jubilation never to be forgotten.

"I can still remember the names of all the lads that figured with the Liberties in those great games. Jack Malone was our captain. Then there were Mick Malone, Johnny Connell, Thomas Griffin, Michael Kirby, John O'Brien, Michael O'Rourke, John Hayes, Thomas Neville, Thomas Keane, John Fitzgerald, John Ryan, James Ryan, Thomas Toomey, John Leonard, Cornelius Sheehan, Michael McNamara, Johnny Coll, John Connors, Michael Connell, John Rahilly, Patrick Woods and Martin Griffin.

"They were a grand bunch surely, and the only pity was the unfortunate manner in which they were deprived of the honour of going forward for a bid for All-Ireland honours."

That, however, is another story that must wait the telling on a further occasion.