

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 19)—WILLIE REAL of Pallasgreen

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

I KNOW of only three memorials in stone in all Gaeldom which commemorate athletic distinction.

Limerick City boasts as one of its public monuments, a tribute to a grand figure, the late Jack O'Grady. Another is in a quiet churchyard in Co. Wexford, where John Mangan sleeps his long sleep. The stone over his grave tells of the fears which made him renowned.

On the 8th August, 1894, one of Limerick's greatest athletes, Willie Real, of Pallasgreen, died at the early age of thirty-three years. He had been in failing health for a long time.

On the 11th August, 1895, in a remote graveyard at Old Pallas, the memorial erected by his fellow Gaels to the memory of a loved figure was unveiled by P. T. Hoc-tor.

Monuments which have been erected to other Gaels have been tributes to their devotion to the movement in general. The rarity of the honour paid to O'Grady, Mangan and Real, whose careers were alike in many respects, renders them all the more impressive. It certainly was not misplaced, and in view of changing ideas and decaying customs it remains a fitting reminder of greatness that might seem to have finally departed.

ADMIRABLE IN MANY PHASES

Willie Real was a simple peasant athlete, whose name is almost unknown outside the borders of his native district. Yet the life of such a man, great in one sphere and admirable in many phases, can be as edifying as that of a world-conqueror in another.

Real of Pallasgreen had not alone athletic merit of a supreme order, he also possessed qualities for which we have no measure except words. Of all the men whose achievements have been reviewed in this series of articles, he was one who made least noise in the athletic world, and cared least for its most envied attentions.

Athlete in the narrow sense of the word he was not. Nature had endowed him with a magnificent physique, and providence gifted him with a simple, modest heart. The arena of his content was bounded by the confines of his native parish, and his mind never responded to an impulse that bred discontent with the quiet delights of an Irish countryside. He cherished no Alexandrian ambitions for new realms to subdue. If his prowess gave him prominence in the rural contests of his neighbours, he had gathered all the laurels that his vanity desired.

Pallasgreen and its surrounding countryside and neighbouring villages loom largely in Irish athletic history. The man of that historic tract of country, stretching from within the borders of Tipperary, through Limerick, and beyond the frontier of Cork, have made history in the realm of native physical endeavour.

I have no desire to provoke a controversy as to the pure bloodedness of any section of our people. It is a subject beyond my reach, and one which I prefer to leave to others to discuss if they think the topic worth the trouble.

The late Paddy Devlin, who supplied me with a lot of data concerning our Limerick athletes, often told me that he heard that an alien strain was introduced into this part centuries ago. It is not improbable, and if this is true, it must have been kindly, vigorous blood, and its offspring must soon have become "more Irish than the Irish themselves."

"TONIC INFUSION."

It may, therefore, be that we owe some of the vigour and fire which has given us many superb athletes and a splendid race of hurlers to the age-old presence of a hardy, adventuring race who mingled in the blood of the native Gael a tonic infusion which strengthened without transforming the qualities and ideals of the olden communities.

Perhaps Willie Real shared in this strain. This, however, is certain—there was nothing else alien in his composition. He was a Gael in every pulse beat and to the pith of his frame.

Willie Real was born in 1861, and he died, as already stated, in 1894. His athletic career was, therefore, lamentably short, and the greater number of his performances were accomplished at local sports, for he was quite content with the honours to be won amongst his own people.

He has, nevertheless, many fine achievements to his credit, and in his day had no equal in pushing heavy weights. He held world records in the following events:—42 lbs. with follow, 28 ft. 0½ in., at Limerick, 18th June, 1884; 56 lbs. with follow, 23 ft. 9½ ins., at Limerick, 6th August, 1888; 25½ lbs. with

follow, 36 ft. 8½ ins., at Philadelphia, 25th October, 1888, and 28 lbs. with follow, 35 ft. 1 in., at Kilkenny, 27th September, 1899. Irish championships which he won were: Putting 28 lbs, 1888, 33 ft. 4¼ ins.; 1889, 35 ft. 1 in. Pushing 56 lbs. weight, 1888, 23ft. 9½ ins. 42 lbs. weight from shouder; 1884. 27 ft. 8 ins.; throwing 14 lbs. weight, 1889, 50 ft. 1 in. Throwing 7 lbs. weight, 1889, 83 ft. 8 ins.

FIRST CHAMPIONSHIP.

His first championship was won in 1884, some months before the G.A.A. was founded, when he put the 42 lbs. 27 ft. 8 ins., but it was not until four years later that his real prowess was exhibited.

In 1888, at Limerick Markets Field, he won the G.A.A. championships with the 28 lbs. (33 ft. 4¼ ins.) and 56 lbs. from shoulder (23 ft. 9½ ins.). This latter remained the world's best performance in that event until John O'Grady eclipsed it in 1923. In the same year, also at Limerick, he put the 28 lbs. 34 ft. 11 ins., and the 42 lbs. 28 ft. 0½ ins., the latter an Irish record until 1899.

Towards the end of this season, Real was selected as one of the Gaelic team for the American "invasion." The question of sending hurling and athletic teams to America was originally mooted by Maurice Davin. The idea was received with enthusiasm, and subscriptions poured in from clubs and individual Gaels, including Most Rev. Dr. Croke and Michael Davitt, both of whom warmly supported the project.

The Irish team sailed for the States on the 16th of September, 1888, and were the recipients of a most enthusiastic ovation on their arrival in New York. They were met by representative committees of Irish societies and athletic clubs, and were accompanied to their hotel amidst scenes of the greatest enthusiasm. The warm welcome given to the team in New York was repeated in every city and town which the Gaels visited in the course of the tour. Everywhere they were received with joy by their countrymen. Bands turned out, Irish and American flags waved in the streets, excursions were organised in their honour; their health was drunk at

numerous banquets, and their performances inspired eloquent speeches, and evoked outbursts of cheering, which had never previously been associated with athletic contests in the States. Newspapers were full of admiration of the splendid physique of the Gaels, and the exhibitions of hurling eclipsed everything that had been ever witnessed in America in the shape of athletic displays. Americans freely admitted that they had no game to equal hurling.

ACHIEVEMENTS IN U.S.A.

Willie Real found no one in America fit to extend him with the heavy weights, and his principal achievements in putting the 56 lbs. 23 ft. 0½ in. at Boston and shoving a 25½ lb. shot 36 ft. 8½ ins. at Philadelphia long remained outstanding feats in the trans-Atlantic arena. His putt of the 56 lbs. was not beaten until 1913, and it took a man from the same district, Paddy Ryan, to surpass it.

He returned to Ireland on the completion of the tour, and in 1899 reached the zenith of his fame. He made a world record at Kilkenny by pushing the 28 lbs. 35 ft. 1 in., and this putt remained unsurpassed until his own cousin, Con Ryan, added two inches to the distance in September, 1901, at Errill.

In this same year he was credited with putting the 14 lbs. weight, 50 ft. 1 in., and hurling the 7 lbs., 83 ft. 8 ins., both of which performances were not outclassed for years. In September, 1889 he pushed the 56 lbs., 24 ft. 3½ ins., but this record was never passed, nor probably ever claimed.

These few typical performances will suffice to show the prowess of this most modest of all our champions, who, like many other men of great physique, was doomed to an early grave.

Real never stripped in an athletic contest. He simply discarded his coat and let his braces drop at his sides and stepped up to the mark.

He lived at a time and amongst a people prolific in such great strength, and who enjoyed athletic contests for their own sake. That spirit and the men who responded to it have long since passed, and hence our present lack of successors and renown.

The memorial stone erected by his fellow Gaels above the grave of Willie Real is a tribute to his qualities of heart as much as it is an enduring testimony to his worth as an athlete. In every phase of his all too brief life he was worthy of commemoration.

No. 20 — John J. Bresnihan, of Castletownconyers.