

# Great Limerick Athletes

## No. 96—VERY REV. EUGENE SHEEHY, of Bruree

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

A GREAT Irish patriot and a stormy petrel of the early G.A.A. days was Very Rev. Eugene Sheehy, P.P., of Bruree, who was often referred to as "The Land League Priest."

Associated with the G.A.A. from its earliest days and a great friend of the founders, particularly Michael Cusack, Maurice Davin, John Wyse Power and John McKay, all of whom attended the inaugural meeting; he really came into the limelight following the 1887 All-Ireland Congress, which was undoubtedly the most memorable one in its long history and was marked by incidents of unparalleled excitement.

The late Thomas F. O'Sullivan in his "Story of the G.A.A.," writing of the convention said: "There were many circumstances which invested the proceedings with unusual interest. In the first place the Executive had aroused a good deal of hostility owing to its vigorous action in suspending Clubs and individuals who had refused to obey its rulings. Many people deplored the withdrawal of Maurice Davin from the Presidency, and blamed the Executive for his retirement. The expulsion of the Royal Irish Constabulary, though that body was then very unpopular with masses of people, was regarded by some weaklings as introducing the political element into what was claimed to be a purely athletic organisation; and the 'non-politicians'—those who were too meanly shoneen to identify themselves with a purely national movement, and too cowardly to openly oppose it—all in their power to bring about the overthrow of the Executive.

### TIMOROUS PEOPLE WERE UNEASY.

"The fact that men like the late P. N. Fitzgerald, Cork, who made no secret of their desire to wipe out the British name and nation in this country, were identified with the Association gave the organisation a complexion which made many timorous people uneasy and aroused the hostility of a large number of clergymen. Many teams had also grievances, real or imaginary, in regard to the county and inter-county contests, and were anxious to get even with the Executive.

"It may be stated that there never was a governing body against whom was arrayed so many influences, and, on the other hand, it must be admitted that no governing body ever had behind it more loyal and enthusiastic supporters. The strong Nationalist views of the Executive; their vigorous action in crushing insubordination, and their earnest, if somewhat injudicious, efforts to maintain discipline, appealed to thousands of Gaels in all parts of the country, and accounted for the fact that they were able to withstand the attacks of the most powerful critics and the most insidious foes. Looking back now calmly on the work of the Executive, it must be admitted that the members of the governing body made some mistakes, but they were the mistakes of strong men with strong views, determined to make the Association what it is to-day—not only a powerful athletic body, but a great national organisation."

### OVER 800 CLUBS WERE REPRESENTED.

So large was the number of delegates attending the Convention that special trains were run from many districts to suit their convenience. Over 800 clubs were represented, each by two delegates. The proceedings took place in the Courthouse, Thurles, which was densely packed. The whole place was seething with excitement and the meeting was of a very lively and interesting character. After much argument a section of the delegates led by Rev. John Scanlan, C.C., Nenagh, left the Convention and held a rival meeting, the object being the formation of a new Executive in opposition to the one appointed by the Courthouse gathering.

The date of these stormy events was November 9th, 1887, and on November 22nd, the Archbishop of Cashel, Most Rev. Dr. Croke, held a conference at the Palace, Thurles, with Michael Davitt and Maurice Davin with the object of taking steps to reconstruct the Association. Eventually a new All-Ireland Congress was called for January 4th, 1888, it being directed that County Conventions be held in all areas prior to that date to select delegates, etc.

The Limerick Gaels met on December 30th, thirty-one clubs being represented, and when this gathering re-elected Mr. P. O'Brien ("Twenty") Chairman by 71 votes to 59 for Mr. Robert Coll, a number of delegates, led by Very Rev. Eugene Sheehy, P.P., left the meeting and held a second convention, at which they also selected delegates for the Thurles Congress.

### LIMERICK HAD THE "LUXURY" OF TWO BOARDS.

The Congress was duly held and Limerick had nine delegates in attendance, including Father

Sheehy, who was elected as the Limerick representative on the Central Council. Immediately afterwards the 1887 All-Ireland Championships were proceeded with. No Limerick team took part in the hurling championship. The county suffered from the luxury of two Boards owing to the split at the County Convention, which Father Sheehy declared was packed. Castleconnell was selected by the Executive to represent the county, but Murree, which was affiliated to Father Sheehy's Board, disputed their right and turned up on the day of the fixture. Castleconnell failed to put in an appearance and Tullaroan did not play Murree. By contrast, Limerick's participation in the football championship was completely successful, and they brought to the county the first Gaelic football championship ever decided under Gaelic rules.

At a Central Council meeting held in Dublin on April 29th, the

question of the Limerick split was under discussion, and it was reported that two County Boards existed in the County, each of which organised County Championships in hurling and football. It was decided to get the winners under each body to play off for the County finals and to summon another convention with a view to bringing the division to a close.

### CHAMPIONS OF BOTH BOARDS MEET.

In accordance with this decision the champions of both boards met at Croom before a huge crowd on May 15th. The field arrangements were perfect, and the record throng of people maintained splendid order throughout. South Liberties won the hurling and Commercial the football, thus putting the old Board in the ascendant.

The special convention was held on June 11th. Mr. R. J. Frewen, Treasurer of the Central Council, presiding. This meeting elected Paddy O'Brien Chairman by 123 votes to 86 for Rev. Fr. Dunworth, and when the result was announced Father Sheehy and other priests, with their supporters, left the convention. A complaint regarding the constitution of the convention was subsequently made to the Central Council by Rev. B. O'Mahony, Killeedy, but no action was taken.

The two Limerick Boards were again represented at the next annual Congress of the Association in Thurles, but Father Sheehy and about thirty delegates left early in the proceedings and held a rival meeting at which a resolution was carried calling for the abolition of the Central Council owing to the expense of maintaining same—the work of the G.A.A. to be carried on, in accordance with the existing rules, by the various County Boards.

A great favourite despite his many clashes in field and forum, he, nevertheless, did great work for Gaelic games, and one of his staunchest opponents later paid a great tribute to his worth and said that though at times he may have appeared a little headstrong and hasty there was no doubting his remarkable sincerity. And when the stormy years passed and the Association set down to more tranquil times Father Sheehy was one of those who worked long and enthusiastically to establish native pastimes in the proud place they now occupy.

### EARLY YEARS AND NATIONAL ACTIVITIES.

Born at Broadford, Co. Limerick, on December 25th, 1841, he witnessed in his young days much misery and suffering—the horrors of the Famine, the foul work of the landlords, the evictions, the coffin ships, death and destruction everywhere.

A fluent Irish speaker, he prepared for the priesthood at the Irish College in Paris, and was appointed to Kilmallock for his first curacy. His return to Ireland saw the Land War at its height and it was soon evident that he was going to throw his full weight into the struggle.

A great admirer of Parnell, he attended a meeting called by the "Chief" for Dublin towards the end of 1879 for the formation of a National Association to intensify the work of the Land League. And it was on Father Sheehy's suggestion, strongly supported by Michael Davitt, that the decision was taken to send Parnell to America to raise funds and sympathy for the cause.

As President of the Land agitation movement in Kilmallock, Father Sheehy quickly gained prominence by his forcible speeches and dominant personality. He soon raised the ire of the British occupation authorities and early one May morning in 1881 his house was raided by an imposing force of military and police, and he was arrested. As he was being removed to the local barracks a great crowd of townspeople led by their Parish Priest, Father Downes, P.P., gathered and fell

upon their knees along the street, seizing his hands and clothes and seeking his blessing.

Imprisoned in Kilmainham he had as companions great patriots like Parnell, Davitt and Dillon, and spent four months there, being even refused permission to say Mass during most of the term. On his release he was greeted at meetings held in many parts of Ireland to celebrate the event.

### LIVELY DEBATE IN BRITISH PARLIAMENT.

His arrest led to a lively debate in the British Parliament during the course of which all the Irish nationalist members had to be suspended, so high did feelings run. He came out of prison unchanged and unchangeable, and at various gatherings he launched fiery attacks on the British Government, the landlords, and their methods. At a monster demonstration in Cork, attended by one of the largest crowds ever to throng that city, he preached defiance and sedition, urging his hearers to use every means at their disposal to put an end to the condition of affairs then prevailing. These were dangerous words then, but Father Sheehy never worried on that score, and his courage was never in question.

He toured America twice—in 1881, in order to collect funds for the Land League; when he was accompanied by Mr. Tim Healy, afterwards to become first Governor General of the Irish Free State; and again in later years to seek financial aid for the building of a new church in Bruree.

A close friend of Parnell, it is said on very good authority that it was Father Sheehy who coined the famous phrase: "No man had a right to set bounds to the onward march of a nation" that Parnell used so often, and which now adorns the national tribute to his memory. The great priest figured in the big Galway campaign against the election of Captain O'Shea, but afterwards sided against Parnell at the time of the "split."

It is interesting to note that another great Irish leader, Eamon de Valera, was an altar boy in Bruree during Father Sheehy's ministry there and often served his Mass. A brother of the late David Sheehy, M.P., he was uncle of both Mrs. Tom Kettle and Mrs. Sheehy Skeffington, and old timers in Bruree recall the visits paid by these ladies, particularly in connection with some of the fine concerts Father Sheehy organised there.

### LIFELONG MEMBER OF THE I.R.B.

A lifelong member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and serving for a time on its Executive, he was on intimate terms with some of the great Irish-American leaders, including John Devoy and Patrick Ford. When his health began to fail, following a rather serious accident, he was forced to resign his charge at Bruree and go to live in Dublin. Here he formed a great friendship with Tom Clarke and Sean McDermott and one of the last memories we have of the great old patriotic Limerick priest is of him, at the age of seventy-five, taking his place behind the barricades of the G.P.O. during the glorious Easter Week of 1916 "to administer spiritual consolation," as he said, "to the soldiers of the Irish Republic." Through those terrible but glorious days he remained in the building and only left it when the place was a blazing inferno and the order to evacuate had been given.

He died a little over twelve months later, in July, 1917, and no more noble hearted Irishman rests in famous Glasnevin, where his body lies.

### BUILT UP A GREAT HURLING TEAM.

The ever lessening number who knew him in Bruree recall the manner in which he built up a famous hurling team that some sixty years ago brought to the parish the coveted title of Senior Hurling Champions of Limerick. A familiar figure everywhere the lads from the banks of the Malgue wielded their camans, he was to be seen running up and down the touchline shouting words of advice and encouragement at the players. Full of spirit and daring himself, he had nothing but contempt for the hurler who was reluctant to contest the game with courage and purpose. His cry, disgustingly, "Cowardice!", came from his heart and meant that the player in question would not wear a Bruree jersey again if Father Sheehy could help it.

And a final memory. It is of an occasion when John Gubbins evicted a number of tenants in Garroose. Father Sheehy failed to prevent it but he organised his people against the landlord and soon had a very effective boycott going. And all the police and military they could gather were of little use when the loved saggart collected the local hurling team, and they, with hurleys, lined the ditches and prevented Gubbins and his friends from hunting over the district.