

No. 136—REV. BERNARD O'MAHONY OF Bruff

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

ONE of the greatest workers in the establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association in Limerick, immediately after the foundation of that body at Thurles, in November, 1884, was Rev. Bernard O'Mahony, a native of Bruff, and a great lover of hurling.

Father O'Mahony came of old patriotic Gaelic stock. His mother's maiden name was Emmet—of the family that gave its name to Emmet's Bridge, which spans the railway line south of Kilmallock. His ancestors claimed descent from the forbears of the great Robert Emmet himself, and Father O'Mahony was very proud of this fact and always signed his name "Bernard Emmet O'Mahony."

A real man of the people, he took a leading part in the Land League and the other national movements of his time, and proved himself a fearless advocate in the cause of a then down-trodden race.

INCIDENT OF EARLY DAYS AS A PRIEST

That he was a sturdy son of Limerick is well illustrated from an incident of his early days as a priest. Shortly after ordination he spent a time in the North of Ireland, on loan to a diocese there, that was short of priests.

Orange bigotry was very pronounced at the time and in many parts of the area a priest only walked at the risk of considerable insult and often actual assault. Father O'Mahony was in one such district on an occasion and was greeted with the usual cry of the time "To Hell with the Pope." One burly individual was particularly aggressive and insulting and the sturdy young priest, unable to stand it longer, whipped off his collar and gave his tormentor a good hiding. The keepers of law and order, however, had their revenge. Father O'Mahony was arrested and suffered a month's imprisonment for his plucky deed, and one that silenced a lot of the Northern bullies, giving him an unmolested passage for the remainder of his stay in the place.

WORK FOR THE G.A.A.

When the G.A.A. was founded, Father O'Mahony immediately saw in it a means of organising the young men of the nation into a disciplined body, and threw all his energies into helping the new movement.

He was C.C. in Effin at the time, and immediately formed a hurling club there and of which he was the first President. He gathered all the able-bodied boys and men of the parish together, enrolled them in the ranks of the new Association and tutored them in the use of the caman. A firm believer in training, he had his lads—as he called them—constantly at practice, directing operations himself and insisting that all prepared earnestly and rigorously for their engagements.

"Practice makes perfect" they say, and the Effin hurlers proved the truth of this old proverb by winning many a hard fought game in days before regular Gaelic championship ties were inaugurated. They played several matches, at home and in venues all over South Limerick and North Cork, and on every occasion when they went outside the parish Father O'Mahony was always there to lead his players and to see they got fair play.

ARCHBISHOP CROKE'S VISIT TO RATH LUIRC

One of the proudest days in the history of Effin was the occasion when Fr. O'Mahony headed his team on a visit to Rath Luirc, to

honour the Archbishop of Cashel and Patron of the G.A.A., Most Rev. Dr. Croke, on a visit to the town to assist at the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of the Mercy Convent there, and of which his sister was Rev. Mother at the time.

Another patriot priest and ardent G.A.A. enthusiast, Rev. Eugene Sheehy, P.P., also attended the celebrations, accompanied by the hurlers of Bruree, and both teams were at the railway station to greet Dr. Croke when he stepped off the train.

After the religious ceremonies, the Archbishop thrilled the visiting teams by expressing a wish to see them in action. His love of hurling was well known, and Effin and Bruree agreed to round off the day's celebrations by playing a hurling match. His Grace occupied a seat on the sideline, and was treated to a sparkling display of the native pastime.

ADDRESS BY HIS GRACE.

Before the commencement of play, Dr. Croke addressed the teams and assembled spectators, and said: "As one of the patrons of the Association, I have every reason to congratulate myself and the country at large on the rapid progress made by the Association and on the corresponding impulse given to those fine national sports, of which our fathers were so justly proud, but which a spurious taste for foreign athletic importations had long extinguished amongst us."

In the course of further remarks the Archbishop said that there were three things he had dreaded in connection with the establishment and spread of the Association—that the Organisation would engender bad blood, lead to intemperance and to what might be considered a desecration of the Sabbath. He was glad to say that his apprehension on these three heads had been groundless. "Everything savouring of dictation in the Councils of the Association," he concluded, "should be avoided, and, as long as the fundamental rules are complied with, mere formalities should be left free, subject to local partialities and influence, insofar, at all events, as not to give rise to any unseemly squabble or contention."

THE MATCH.

The match was an exciting one. Bruree opened well, and when they scored a goal Father Sheehy danced with joy and threw his tall silk hat into the air. Effin, however, finished very strongly—first equalised, and then went through for the winning score. At this, Father O'Mahony proved he was every bit as pleased as the Bruree pastor, and his "silker" went so high that spectators thought it would be carried away with the breeze.

The Archbishop congratulated the Effin captain, "Big Tom Buckley," on the great success of his team and remarked to Father O'Mahony, concerning Tom: "Isn't he a magnificent specimen of Irish manhood!" Poor Tom, however, did not live long after, and Fr. O'Mahony did not forget the old skipper, for he travelled many miles to be present at his funeral.

On transfer to Killeedy, Father Bernard set about establishing hurling there, and with the object of encouraging the game organised a big tournament, putting up as a trophy a beautifully worked green flag with harp.

His old clubmates from Effin qualified for the final against Meelin (Co. Cork), and although they scored ten points their opponents got the prized trophy by scoring a goal, which at the time exceeded in value any number of points.

STARTED A NEW HURLING CLUB.

Towards the end of 1888, Father O'Mahony was appointed to the curacy of the united parishes of Tournafulla and Mountcollins, and immediately on arrival there set about starting a hurling club, which he named the "Shamrocks"—this emblem being conspicuous on the front of the jerseys, which were coloured red, with a green sash, in addition to the shamrock. Football was the traditional game of the district but Father O'Mahony had no great love for this code and always had the feeling there was something "foreign" about it.

The Shamrock hurlers were prominent on many a playing pitch in West Limerick, playing many games and always led by the enthusiastic priest.

THE FIRST MATCH.

The first match, played in Jerry James O'Connor's field at Ballybeg, saw them victorious over Tournafulla, and in a return match the Shamrocks were again winners. Then Ashford were encountered, at the home venue in a field kindly provided by Maurice Halloran, and a wonderful game was the outcome—a struggle that is still spoken of by old timers around homely firesides in the parish. Heroes of this memorable game were John Mocky Lyons, Big Phil O'Connell, and Jim Hartnett of Cragg. Ashford won, and were again successful in a return bout.

Templeglantine also got a win over Mountcollins, but victory returned to the Mountcollins standard when Abbeyfeale were engaged—the match taking place at Ned Mick Curtin's field at Inch. This was also a great game. The Shamrocks later combined with Abbeyfeale to do battle in a memorable contest with Granagh, who got the verdict by a point.

VOLUNTEERED FOR AMERICAN MISSION.

In 1891, Father O'Mahony volunteered for the American Mission and was called to the Diocese of Buffalo. Having no one to lead them, the Shamrock Club soon fell away and hurling disappeared from the district. A revival in this, and many other parishes where the caman is not in favour, is long overdue in Limerick. And no better tribute to the memory of the great priest and sterling Irishman, Father O'Mahony, who died while celebrating Mass some years later in America, could be offered than the return of hurling to its once proud place in Mountcollins, and the playing of the game in every parish of the diocese.