



Jim Carney

# This Sporting Life

## Tradition and grassroots loyalty kept Kilkerrin-Clonberne strong

**A** MYTH in sport is that winning is everything. There's a lot more to sporting life than losing a game, even the final of a major competition.

For example, this year's Galway Intermediate Football Championship was well contested and often very exciting. The county semi-final replay between Claregalway and Kilkerrin-Clonberne was an epic encounter, which went to extra-time. I caught it 'live' on local radio and as a Kerry man told Michael O'Hehir back in the early 1940s, explaining why he didn't travel up to Croke Park for an All-Ireland final involving the Kingdom, I saw it on the radio. Galway Bay fm commentator Tommy Devane and analyst Barry Cullinane brilliantly conveyed the thrills and spills and the atmosphere. It went to extra-time and Claregalway were two-point winners, 3-12 to 2-13. They went on to win the county final against a gallant Williamstown team, 1-12 to 0-12. On those two days, Kilkerrin-Clonberne and Williamstown had one thing in common: they lost no honour in defeat. Their loyal followers would discover that after the pain comes the pride and certainly in the eyes of the families and friends of the players, winning wasn't everything.

It was great for the Kilkerrin-Clonberne club to make a big impact this year after the launch of their lovely book, *Fifty Green Fields*, and undoubtedly they will be strong again next year and ready to take another giant leap towards regaining their senior

status. Williamstown published their club history back in 2011; it was written by one of their greatest stalwarts down through the years, Leo Finnegan, and they too will be determined to build on this year's good work on and off the fields of play.

One aspect of the Kilkerrin-Clonberne story that interested me was the success of the twinning, for Gaelic football purposes, of the two half-parishes. That was their status in Church administration down through the years: the Parish Priest would reside in either Clonberne or Kilkerrin and there would be at least one curate in each place. In a large, sprawling but not heavily populated area of north-east Galway it made sense to join forces.

Remarkably, the club will be 130 years old in 2018; it was founded in Clonberne in April 1888. Two teams emerged: Clonberne Davitts, named in honour of the Land League founder Michael Davitt, and Kilkerrin United Brothers commemorating two 1798 martyrs, brothers Henry and John Sheares, sons of a wealthy Cork man. The Davitts were first into action, in late May, playing neighbours Cortoon Shamrocks at Lavalley Lake in front of 1,000 spectators. Six months later, Davitts accepted an invitation to visit Kilkerrin for a game.

Also in the early years there were games involving many other new clubs: Dunmore MacHales, Cloonfad Davitts, Creggs Ballyhooleys, Williamstown Emmets, Glenamaddy William Smith O'Briens, Lisheenaheltia Wolfe Tones, Milltown John

O'Keanes, Kilbannon de Mandevilles, Caherlistrane St Patricks, Corofin Colonel Nolans, Tuam Stars, Killrerin John Dillons, Moylough, Newbridge, Caltra and Mountbellew Emmets.

It would be impossible to tell the whole story here. That's told, vividly, in the Kilkerrin-Clonberne club history book (see end of this column for details of availability). It comes with a wonderfully innovative memory stick that has a whopping nine hours of interviews with players and various club people whose memories span nine decades, starting with Paddy Gormally from Keade, Clonberne, a member of the team who won a junior final against Killasolan in 1939. One of Paddy's clubmates that year was Mick Ryder, winner of an All-Ireland SFC medal in 1938 alongside Mick Higgins, the Cloonkeen, Kilkerrin man who captained Galway to All-Ireland glory in 1934 and he won Sigerson Cup and Galway SFC medals with the great UCG team of that decade. Fran Ryder, the former Dublin star forward, was interviewed and spoke with pride about his father, Mick.

The club gave Johnny Geraghty and Christy Tyrrell to the Galway Three-in-a-Row team, and in 1998 John Divilly won an All-Ireland SFC medal four years after he played for the St Jarlath's, Tuam Hogan Cup winning team. Many other clubmen won All-Ireland medals at various levels in inter-county and colleges football.

One of the leading GAA writers at national level, Martin Breheny, played for Coláiste Seosaimh,

Glenamaddy and in all grades for Kilkerrin-Clonberne. He is one of the many interviewed on video by Ger Finnegan and John Mannion keen to acknowledge the massive contribution made to the promotion of Gaelic football in the area by the late, great Lal Fallon. John Mannion of Royal Rock and Liosbán Industrial Estate fame also helped very significantly to keep his home club alive and well with 20 years of sponsorship.

Ger Finnegan discovered in his travels around Ireland and England, armed with a camera and microphone, the full extent of the human loss caused by emigration, from the 1930s to the '80s, but at home and abroad people were made of strong, resilient spirit; life went on and playing sport did not lose its unique appeal in adversity.

"What I found remarkable," Ger told me, "was that so many very young people, lads and girls, emigrated from the West of Ireland in the 1940s and '50s, many of them only 16 or 17 and some even at 15, but our own people I met in Britain have great memories of home and a great sense of place and roots. They nearly all remember great games of football in the National Schools' competitions, in particular."

We learn in the book that although football declined everywhere in Ireland in the early 1940s because of deprivations caused by World War II, Kilkerrin-Clonberne continued to field teams. When transport for away games became a big problem it was necessary to improvise; for one game when the team didn't

have enough sidecars and donkey carts, a group of players borrowed a hearse!

Back in the old days too, young players' age eligibility was often a vexed issue in the GAA. Paddy Concannon from Cloonkell was the minor (U-18) team's goalkeeper - at the age of 26. And as he said, with a hearty laugh, in his filmed interview recorded ten years ago, "I wasn't the oldest on that team!"

I would encourage all Clonberne and Kilkerrin people to support the publication of their GAA Club's history and the production of the filmed interviews' compilation.

It's also hoped that the very successful ladies football club will put the story of their achievements into print at some time in the future. It's too early at this stage, for while they have been enjoying a golden era there's much more to come.

\* Book and memory stick (nine hours in duration), price €30. For sale in Clonberne: H&M Stores, Maddens, Country Inn and Tony Rafterys. Kilkerrin: Mees' Shop and Conneelys pub. Glenamaddy: Meehan's Londis, Heneghan's Super-Valu, Mattie Potter's, Divillys Leitra. Dunmore: Howleys' Eurospar, Hannon's; Tuam: Quinns, Bishop St. Moylough: Loftus SPAR, Clancy's Centra, Moylough Post Office and Boyles' pub, Laught. Mountbellew: Cunninghams' Shop and Mountbellew Post Office. Ballygar: Tierney's. Newbridge: Cunninghams and Newbridge Post Office. Also from Tom Walsh (087 2326239) and Ger Finnegan (087 2248412).



**KILKERRIN-CLONBERNE 1963.** At back: John Feeney, Jackie Burke, Oliver Dowd, Petie Geraghty, Bill Higgins, Mattie Glynn, Joe McLoughlin, Mickie Rabbitte, Jimmy Higgins, Joe Feeney, Frank McLoughlin, Mickie Devaney, Mick Dowd. In front: Jack Sweeney, Bob Collins, Joe Daly, Johnny Pettit, Christy Tyrrell, Eddie Geraghty, John Mannion, Tom Glynn, Tom McCarthy.