



Nellie, Mary and Peggy Fitzgerald at the re-opening of Grange Parish Church in 1997.



Betty O'Connell, Old Road, with Patricia Hanley, New Line, Grange at the presentation to Canon Costello.

BISHOP PATRICK O'NEILL

(Bishop of Limerick 1945 to 1958)

By Michael Barry

Patrick O'Neill was born in Grange, on the Fedamore side of the bridge just over the Camogue River, in what most Grange dwellers of modern times refer to as "Tony Barry's house". The same Barry/O'Neill house was the scene of the Grange Ambush in November 1920, and the house was heavily raked with machine gun fire from an armoured car which had advanced to the bridge just 100 yards away. Patrick, aged 29 at that time, was not in the house during the ambush, having received his ordination as a priest some five years previously, he was based in Maynooth during that occasion.

Patrick was born to John and Mary O'Neill on 8th February 1891. The *Census* of 1901 records that Patrick, age 10, was the second youngest of nine siblings and could speak both Irish and English. Two servants also lived in the O'Neill house at that time and are also recorded. Interestingly, the male servant was of the Church of Ireland faith. Patrick was educated at St Munchin's College, Limerick, and at St Patrick's College, Maynooth.

Shortly after his ordination in June 1915, Patrick returned to Maynooth to study for a Doctorate in Divinity. He was appointed to the staff of Maynooth and held the post of Professor of Moral Theology before becoming vice-president of the college in 1936. He became PP Bruff and St Munchin's before he was appointed bishop on 15th December 1945. His consecration followed on 24th February 1946. The now Bishop O'Neill prepared the ground for the development of St Munchin's College and moved to the bishop's residence at Kilmoyle. Despite being a shy person, he was the driving force behind a great deal of diocesan work. He died suddenly in Kilmoyle on 26th March 1958 and is buried in the priests' plot at Mount St Lawrence Cemetery.

The Funeral of Bishop Patrick O'Neill

The funeral of Bishop O'Neill was one of the largest ever seen in the county of Limerick, attended by thousands of mourners. The funeral ceremony itself at St John's Cathedral was a 'ticket only' affair. The enormity of the event was an obvious testimony to the respect in which Bishop O'Neill was held and also a reflection of the

Ireland of that era. The President, Sean T O’Kelly, attended as did the Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera. Hundreds of fellow religious were in attendance in addition to representatives of the Irish Army, many other institutions and thousands of ordinary members of the public. It is recorded that the Papal Nuncio, His Excellency, Most Rev Dr Levame, vested in full robes, attracted widespread interest.

The following extracts are taken from the report of the funeral contained in the *Limerick Leader* of Saturday, 5th April 1958 and reflect the solemnity and scale of the occasion:

“The Cathedral, to which admission was by ticket, was packed to capacity, but the hundreds unable to find accommodation within the edifice spent the time of waiting in prayer. Indeed, the demeanour of the great throng outside the Cathedral was most edifying. It was obvious that the people were filled with a sense of personal sorrow in that they had lost a great spiritual father.”

“The scene within the Cathedral, as the vested bishops, monsignori, canons and some 250 priests, representing the secular and regular clergy, entered the Cathedral at 12 o’clock for the Solemn Requiem Mass and the imparting of the final absolution was most impressive.”

“The chanters at the mass were: Very Rev J Cowper, DD, PP, St Patrick’s; Very Rev F O’Sullivan, OSB, Prior, Glenstal; Very Rev WJ O’Grady, PP, Kilfinane; Rev G. Griffin, CC, St Munchin’s; Rev D Kelly, CC, Ennis; Rev K O’Gorman, CC, Ennis; Rev J Brown, CC, Bruff, and Rev M Sadlier, CC, Granagh.”

“The scene as the funeral cortege passed from the Cathedral to Mt St Lawrence was one of wonderful reverence. The whole route was lined by hundreds of people who joined in the recitation of the Rosary and despite the huge throngs congregated at vantage points, the decorum of the people was beyond all praise.”

“The 8,000 members of the Arch-Confraternity of the Holy Family did not march in the procession. Instead, they lined each side of the route in single file from the Cathedral to the brick-lined grave in the priests’ plot and as the hearse moved along the Confraternity men paid their respect by bowed heads. The Catholic Boy Scouts formed a guard of honour at each side of the hearse, which was preceded by the clergy.”

“Chief mourners were Mrs G Barry, Mrs M Power, Mrs T Power, and Sister Mary Peter, Good Shepherd Convent, Adelaide, Australia (sisters); Mr G Barry (brother-in-law); Messrs N McCarthy, Gerard McCarthy and P Power (nephews); Rev J Corbett, CSSR; Rev T English, CC, Knocklong; Dr J Humphreys, Dr F Humphreys, TD; Dan, Timothy, Jack, James, and Dan

Humphreys; Sister Columba, Presentation Convent, Bandon; Sister Claire, Medical Missionaries of Mary; Mrs Langan, Mrs English, Mrs Ryan, Mrs Loughnane, Misses M English, Mary and Eva Humphreys (cousins).”

“Next came the Mayor and the members of the City Council, followed by the Manager and members of the staffs; members of Limerick County Council, members of Trade Unions, Chamber of Commerce, Harbour Board and other public bodies; the Knights of Malta, Red Cross, St John’s Ambulance Brigade, members of various sodalities.”

“Following the interment, the Cathedral Chapter met in St John’s Presbytery and elected Right Rev Mgr Moloney, PP, VF, Vicar Capitular, who yesterday received the following message from the Vatican: *Holy Father grieved learn demise worthy Bishop O’Neill. Expresses sincere sympathy and cordially imparts to clergy and faithful of bereaved diocese paternal Apostolic Blessing.* In reply, Mgr Moloney sent the following telegram: *Secretary, Vatican City: Clergy, faithful Limerick, mourning loss beloved Bishop, comforted and consoled Holy Father’s gracious message, sympathy and blessing; express filial homage, Vicar Capitular.*”

Patrick O’Neill – Fedamore hurler and sports enthusiast

In his younger days, Patrick O’Neill was a renowned Fedamore hurler and athlete. He also had a great love of horse riding and regularly hunted with the Ward Hounds. The great Kilkenny-born sports journalist, Seamus Ó Ceallaigh, who spent most of his life in Limerick, wrote an article in the week following his funeral on the sporting exploits of the younger days of Bishop O’Neill. The following is Ó Ceallaigh’s article verbatim.

“When the Crozier fell from the lifeless grasp of a great Bishop of Limerick, the late Most Rev Patrick O’Neill, DD, there passed to his heavenly reward not only a great scholar and Churchman but a patriotic Irishman, who brought honour and renown to his native Limerick on hurling and athletic fields in days that cannot come again.

“When Ireland’s national colours appeared at the Vatican for the first time, at the Beatification of Blessed Oliver Plunkett, they were presented by the then Dr O’Neill. At that time, the colours were banned in Ireland. At the ceremony of Beatification, the traditional bouquet, consisting of a beautiful arrangement of green, white and orange specially selected flowers, was presented.

“Turning away from the graveside at Mt St Lawrence last Saturday, I met a pair of great Fedamore and Limerick hurlers – Willie Gleeson and Paddy Clohessy.

The latter reminded me of a photograph in my possession of the 1912 Fedamore team, winners of the Murphy Cup and Medals, Infirmary and Band Challenge Cups, and Lyons Memorial Medals.

“In this picture the future Bishop is included with his teammates of that great side: M Clifford, M Harrington, M Bourke, T Hayes, T Keane, M Hayes, P Keane, J Clifford, R O’Donnell, Ned Treacy (captain), Willie Gleeson, M O’Donnell, P Power, M Collins, S Gleeson, and J Whelan.

“Willie Gleeson remembers the young Patrick O’Neill in his early days at Fedamore School. He rode three miles on a little black donkey and even at a tender age, gave an indication of the aptitude for study, the forerunner of a brilliant academic career.

“Fedamore has often been called the “Hurlers Home”, and the youth of the day enjoyed a ‘puck about’ when released from school. Crooked sticks were the usual implements they used, and young O’Neill was the envy of the entire school when he arrived one day with a beautifully shaped camán, the boss and lower portion painted blue.

“These lads developed into the great Fedamore team of 1910 and Willie’s abiding memory of that championship campaign is the great display of Patrick O’Neill as wing forward in an exciting game with Young Ireland.

“Fedamore reached the County Final, in which they drew with Commercials, 2-1 all, at the Markets Field on September 9th, 1911. The replay took place on October 29th, by which time the Maynooth students had returned to college, and Fedamore were beaten 9-2 to 3-0.

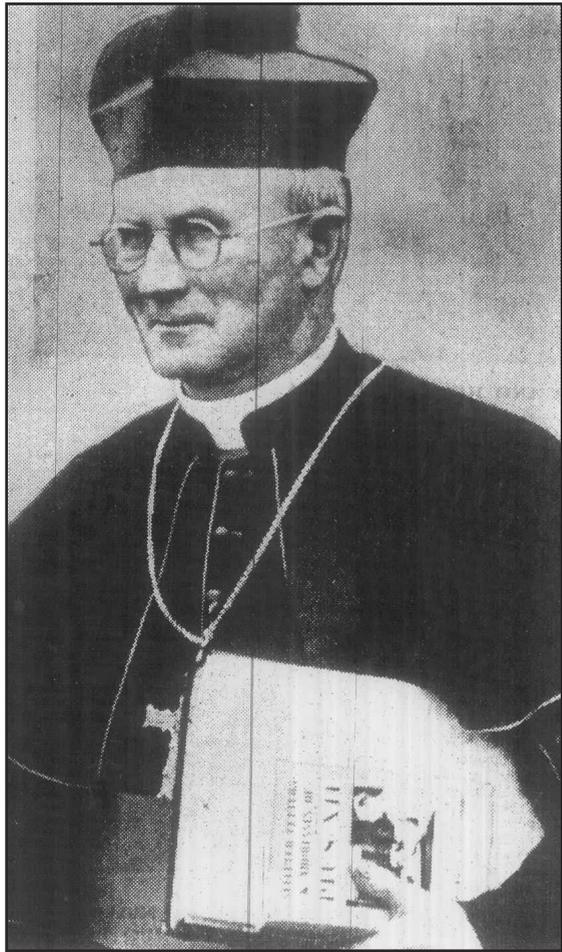
“The young Fedamore lad was not long a student of St Munchin’s College when we find him figuring with them in a challenge hurling game against a very prominent City club of the period – Sarsfields – composed mainly of members of the drapery trade. The venue was a field near Ascot Terrace, and the date, Thursday, November 23rd, 1905. The result was: Sarsfields, 1-12; St Munchin’s College, 3-4. The teams will be recalled with interest:-

“Sarsfields – J O’Leary, M Lynch, T Lynch, J Keane, J Naughton, J Bassett, M Leahy, J Kirby, P Hayes, J Freese, P Liston, T O’Donnell, J Dwane, M Stapleton, M Brouder, T Archdeacon.

“St Munchin’s College – M Fitzpatrick, P Feely, J Lee, T Normoyle, P Kearney, W Tobin, J Gleeson, T Mulcahy, S Gleeson, M Barry, J Dolan, J Mortell, W Leonard, T Irwin, P O’Neill.

“In 1913, he was a member of the famous Maynooth college team, the Celts, who hurled many of the leading teams in the country. In the words of one of the great players of that time, ‘they beat all before them.’

“When Dr O’Neill was elevated to the See of Limerick, the people of his native parish presented him with his Episcopal Robes. In an address on the occasion of his Consecration, these words are found: ‘We are proud of your long and intimate associations with the parish. We remember your brilliant achievements in the hurling field and in the athletic arena, deeds that might well inspire the youth of our parish today. We in Fedamore are proud of parish traditions.’



Bishop of Limerick, Patrick O'Neill. *Limerick Leader*

“In the course of his reply, Dr O’Neill said: ‘The ties which bind me to my beloved parish are many and sacred. To these, another is now added. I feel proud that the honour conferred on me by the Holy Father is shared by the people and parish of Fedamore. No people and no parish could be more worthy of that honour. I pray that God may bless and protect them now and forever.’

“Replying to an address from the GAA on the same occasion, Dr O’Neill said: ‘You are doing work for the youth which perhaps is not recognised sufficiently sometimes. By training youth to build up their bodies by the practice of athletic exercise of one kind or another, you are training their minds and souls as well. The saintly Pope Pius X said on one occasion that the athletic exercises of the body cannot fail to have beneficial influence on the exercise of the soul.’

“Dr O’Neill, too, was a noted athlete. His peak season was 1913 when he won the 120 yards Hurdles Championship at the Markets Field and followed this up by taking the All-Ireland title at the GAA Championships held at Mallow on July 20th, his time on this occasion 16 4/5th seconds. At the same meeting, he was second in the long jump, his distance 21 feet 4 inches. Other Limerick successes at that same championships were recorded by Jim Fahy, Michael O’Brien, John O’Grady and Tim Leahy.

“Dr O’Neill later represented Limerick at the Inter-County tests held at Killarney on August 14th, and again captured the 120 yards hurdles event. The well-known handicapper, DM Power, of Ballywalter, often said afterwards that it was the greatest race over the hurdles he had witnessed in his long connection with athletics. The time was 17 seconds.

“Dr O’Neill was very keen on athletics and stressed their value at County Conventions of the NA and CA. To the Limerick City GAA Board, he presented a silver perpetual challenge cup for the development of athletics in Primary Schools.

“A life member of the Limerick City Handball Club, he was a founder member of the Canon Punch Park, heading the list with a substantial contribution.

“Dr O’Neill had another great interest as well – a love of horses, and he spent many pleasant days hunting, mainly with the Ward Hounds. A fearless horseman, he had the reputation of finishing on a few occasions alone with the hounds. On one such day, he was the only member of the hunt to jump a broad river and be with the hounds to the end of the trail.

“He will walk no more amongst us, but in that storehouse where we treasure the memory of those whom we have loved and lost, his name will be honoured forever. Ar dheis an Ríogh go raibh a anam geal!”

For local historians who may be interested, a direct and interesting link exists between the O’Neill family of Bishop Patrick O’Neill’s era and the current occupiers, Tony Barry and family. Bishop Patrick O’Neill’s sister, Gertrude, married Gerald Barry, who was a first cousin of Tony Barry’s father, Joseph. Tony acquired the farm in 1958 from Gerald, who retired from farming after the sale. A large framed photo of Bishop Patrick O’Neill hung for many years at the Barry house and was donated some years back to the Fedamore Historical Society.

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References and Notes:

(1) *The author acknowledges the Limerick Leader archives, Limerick Diocese website www.limerick-diocese.org and an article by Seamus Ó Ceallaigh as the primary sources of the above material.*