



Monsignor O'Donnell of the O'Donnell family, The Yard.



GAA medals won by Richard 'Barlow' O'Donnell.

# CANON DENIS BROWNE (1929-2013)

By Francis O'Dwyer

*"I love to run in the dawn. It is beautiful to see the day dawning don't you think..."*

When Denis Canon Browne, or Father Denis as he preferred to be known, went to his eternal reward on December 11th, 2013, he left a legacy of athletic promotion and achievement to add to the fruits of his ministerial calling in life. Having served in six parishes, in two of these as a parish priest, over a 51-year period, Father Denis is fondly remembered as a priest of great compassion, humility, gentleness and devotion. All who knew him, describe him as simply a lovely and gentle man, devoted to his faith.

As well as his pastoral life, he had two other passions, namely the promotion of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and athletics.

In every parish that he served and indeed far beyond these, he was widely known for his involvement in youth athletics. As a runner himself, he completed twenty-three marathons and also won thirteen All-Ireland medals for track and field events. Remarkably, these athletic achievements occurred between the age of 51 and 74, after he had returned to running in 1980 following a twenty-seven-year absence.

When he retired in 2004, Father Denis took up residence beside Grange Stone Circle in a house that has been in the Browne family since 1939. He celebrated daily Mass in St Patrick's and St Brigid's Church in Grange, and when, after a few years into his retirement, he could no longer drive, he walked to church every morning. If the weather was inclement, he still walked to church, attired in his cap, gloves and wellingtons. Such natural athleticism was a hallmark of his life and was as normal to him as the gift of strong faith that he had, which he practised and promoted in his unique gentle manner.

## *Early Life*

Born in Thomastown, Effin, Co Limerick on 24th April, 1929, Denis Joseph was the second of five children of parents Dan and Kate Browne (nee McCarthy), who both hailed from Meelin, Newmarket Co Cork. His siblings were Jimmy, Davie, (who also became a priest), Cassie and John. Jimmy still lives in Thomastown,

Cassie in Castletroy and John in Dublin. Father Davie died at the age of 81, on 17th October 2011.

His father Dan, born in 1888, was well-known for his activities during the War of Independence, in the North Cork area. Dan was a member of the IRB and the IRA and was a member of Liam Lynch's "Flying Column". In 1917, he helped to form a small group of Volunteers in his home village of Meelin. In 1921, Meelin suffered one of the worst British reprisals when incendiary devices (bombs) were used by them, following the ambush of a Black-and-Tan raiding party, intent on carrying out a raid on the house of Dan's father. Dan remained active during the fight for Irish Independence and at the time of the "Truce", he held the rank of Adjutant 2nd Battalion Cork No. 4 Brigade. He held the post of Registrar of North Cork District Court from October 1921 until June 1922, when civil war broke out.

In 1926, Dan Browne and his new wife, Kate, came to live in Thomastown, where they had a farm. Born into a family setting in 1929, where farming was the primary source of income, Denis and his siblings had to assist with the chores. One of his favourite chores was milking cows with his brother, Jimmy. Denis lived a very happy contented childhood and was known for his love of simple fun.

#### *Education*

At six years of age, in 1935, Denis commenced his education at Effin National School. The school principal, Mr Tim Hannon, was also a well-known writer for the *Limerick Leader* at the time, using the pseudonym "Rambling Thady". At the age of twelve, Denis transferred to national school at Charleville CBS. He was due to go into fifth class, but he was erroneously placed in sixth class. Arising from the mistake, Denis lost out on one year at national school, but owing to his academic abilities, this was not detrimental to his educational pursuits and achievements. Towards the end of his national school education, he secured one of two available scholarships to attend secondary school at St Munchin's College, Limerick. This achievement was reported in the *Cork Examiner* of 30th July 1942 with the newspaper headline "Successful Charleville Student".

Denis boarded at St Munchin's College for five years, and it was there that his love of athletics was nurtured and flourished. Athletic competitions at the college saw Denis blitz the courses and witnessed the emergence of a competitive streak that would be a hallmark of his athletic prowess and career.

Denis was very much "a home bird". His sister, Cassie, recalls that prior to his return, after term break, to college at St Munchin's and later at Maynooth, he would "go very quiet a day or two before he was due to go back".

#### *Pursuit of Athletics*

During his summer holidays from St Munchin's College and later from Maynooth College, Denis and his brother, Davie, cycled to track and field events, locally and

throughout Munster. Such was his success that, in August of 1948, the famed historian An Maignaire Sógach had penned a poem of admiration of his achievements, noting that “In four years’ time he will rattle world champions in a great battle and to Ireland will bring a medal to symbol an Olympic title”. An Maignaire Sógach was a pseudonym used by Mainchin Seoighe from Tankardstown, Bruree, in his weekly *Limerick Leader* newspaper column “Odds and Ends”, which spanned from 1944 to 2002.

Recorded evidence of Denis’s athletic successes during those earlier years is limited. However, notes recorded in the *Limerick Leader* for the National Athletic and Cycling Association (NACA) recalled that on July 24th, 1948, Denis Brown[e] won the 880 yards county championship at Knocklong. It was also noted that Denis Brown[e] was a member of the Croom team that came second in the County Limerick novice cross country championships at Rathkeale on 7th January 1950, and that he came second in the 40 yard flat (a sprint) in the Muintir na Tire event held at Knocklong on 30th July 1950.

At Oola, on 16th January 1950, he won the 880 yards event at the annual open sports day as well as competing in the 100 and 220 yard races. It is interesting to note that these sports competitions of the time involved a multitude of events, including running, cycling, obstacle courses, long jump and high jump. Father Denis would, in later years, establish these events for the youth of the parishes that he served.

#### *Cycling Excursions*

During his teenage years, Denis performed various tasks on the home farm for which he received pocket money. His sister, Cassie, recalls that Denis spent the majority of his pocket money attending the “pictures” in Limerick. On his way to and from Limerick, by bicycle, Denis stopped off in Holycross at his aunts’ house for refreshments and to break the journey. His aunts, Katie and Maggie Browne, moved into that house beside Grange Stone Circle in 1939.

When they had money, Denis and his brother, Jimmy, cycled to West Clare for a holiday for a few days. Even at that young age, Denis had a love of gadgets – cameras and tape recorders were particular favourites, but these were elusive items in those times. On one such holiday, Denis came across a “Folding Brownie Camera” which he was intent on purchasing. Denis managed to convince Jimmy to part with all of his pocket money, and with this added to his own money, Denis acquired the “Folding Brownie”. After that, everything considered worthwhile was photographed.

A few years later, he acquired a tape recorder. One evening, there was a group of his mother’s friends gathered in her kitchen. At the time, Denis was studying for the priesthood and, of course, the local ladies were very polite to him. Unknown to the ladies, he placed the recorder in their vicinity and recorded their conversation. When he played back the recording to the ladies, they were mortified to hear

themselves! The men folk who were outside chatting at the crossroads moved a safe distance away, lest they too 'be caught on tape'.

### *Ordination and Priesthood*

Denis spent seven years in Maynooth College, having enrolled in 1946. In addition to his clerical studies, the pursuit of athletics also featured. On a regular basis, he ran with some of the priests and students around the college pitches.

He was ordained at Maynooth, along with fifty-seven other clerical students, by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, on 21st June 1953. His first parish appointment was to Glenroe, not far from his home in Thomastown.

At the time of his ordination and for years after, there was a rule within the Catholic Church that priests could not run competitively. This meant that at the age of 24, Father Denis was precluded from partaking in athletic competitions.

Father Denis ministered as a priest in a number of parishes. The first, as already noted, was Glenroe (1953-1960). Subsequently, he served in Granagh (1960-1967), in Glin (1970-1976), in Rockchapel/Bruree (1976-1983), in Donoghmore/Knockea/Roxboro (1983-1989) and in Ballyagran/Colmanswell (1989-2004). While serving in the latter mentioned parish, Father Denis was elevated to Canon.

During all those ministries, Father Denis was a very popular priest, much liked and respected. In one parish, he was described as being "like a breath of fresh air". He was acknowledged as a special friend of the elderly and his gentleness put them at an immediate ease. His interest in the well-being of the youth of his parishes was a principal focus of his work, and in this regard, he supported them by organising athletic clubs and activities and other games. He ferried them to and from sports events, GAA matches, 'Pioneer' quizzes and other community activities. He also brought groups on day trips that included outings to Ballybunion. While in Ballyagran/Colmanswell Parish, he organised an outing to Lough Gur every year for the senior class. Here they met their counterparts at Patrickswell National School. Michael Quinlan, Principal Teacher at Patrickswell, led a historical tour of the area, which was followed by a lakefront lunch and other activities.

There was amazement everywhere at the number of young people that Father Denis would fit in his car, which predominantly was a "Volkswagen Beetle". Upon returning home after success at an event, several youngsters would be observed out the window of his car, waving trophies won. Once, Father Denis was about to leave his parish with a carload of youngsters for a match farther afield when he was asked how the other members of the team were to travel. He assured the enquirer that the whole team was in his car!

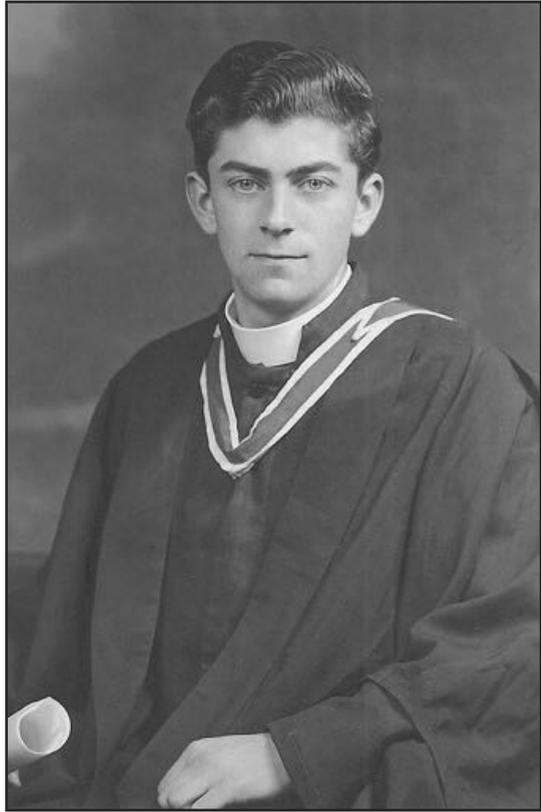
During a period in Granagh Parish, his brother, Father Davie, who also loved athletics, served in the parish of Parteen in Co Clare. Every second Sunday, a Volk-

swagen Beetle, loaded up with youngsters, left Granagh and headed to Parteen to compete with Father Davie's youngsters. Events such as running, high jump, long jump, pole vault and bicycle racing were held. Points were allotted for each event, and the team with most points after all the events was declared the winner. Of course, Father Davie and his youngsters arrived in Granagh on the following Sunday to play out the battles all over again. Inevitably, the competition was good between the brothers, but more importantly for both, the children had fun.

*Governing Bodies in Athletics*

While in Glenroe Parish, in January 1957, Father Denis acceded to the position of Chairman of the Limerick County Board of the National Athletic and Cycling Association. He held that position for a number of years. He also held the position of president of that association and his brother, Father Davie, also held those positions in the association.

The NACA was formed in 1923 as a thirty-two county athletics body and represented the island of Ireland on the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) – the world governing body responsible for the organisation of the Olympics. In 1924, the Northern Ireland Amateur Athletic Cycling and Cross Country Association was formed after a dispute with the NACA. The Amateur Athletic Association, which represented Great Britain, accepted this breakaway group under its jurisdiction. Furthermore, the IAAF adopted an amendment to its constitution in 1930 which defined member organisations as being contiguous with the political entities, effectively ratifying the Northern Ireland body's membership of the British organisation. The NACA rejected this ruling and was suspended from the IAAF, meaning no athlete who was a member of the NACA could compete in Olympic Games. As a result, there were no competitors representing the Republic of Ireland in the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936. This sad affair is mentioned else-



Fr Denis Browne as a newly ordained priest.

where in this book in relation to the inability of Ireland's great army equestrian team to compete in the Berlin Olympics.

In 1937, some Irish clubs broke away from the NACA to set up the Irish Amateur Athletic Union (IAAU), and this body became a member of the IAAF, thus permitting members of the new body to represent Ireland at international events.

It wasn't until 1967 that the NACA (then known as the NACAI) and the IAAU (then known as the Amateur Athletic Union of Éire) were both dissolved and Bord Lúthchleas na hÉireann (BLE) was formed, bringing an end to a bitter dispute within athletics in the Republic of Ireland.

It is interesting to note that at the Annual County Convention of Limerick County Board of the NACA, held on 9th August 1959, as chairman of the board, Father Denis outlined the board's position with regard to the forthcoming 1960 Olympic Games. The following extract from the meeting record is interesting in the context of his father's activities in the fight for independence and the nationalistic upbringing Denis would have had.

“We would welcome any agreement by which NACA athletes could compete in the 1960 Olympics, provided they are not asked to sacrifice their principles. We have been suspended, and our right to compete in the Olympics denied, simply because we refuse to be satisfied with anything less than a thirty-two county Ireland. Great athletes of the past had sacrificed their right to compete in the Olympics because of that and there were really great athletes of the present who were also imbued with the same spirit. They were not prepared to depart from the principles of a thirty-two county Ireland...” Along with the then political aspect of the NACA, the core aspirations of the board were to promote athletics amongst the youth, in every part of Limerick at every opportunity – aspirations that Father Denis pursued over his lifetime.

#### *Return to Running*

It was while in Rockhill/Bruree Parish that his love for active running was rekindled. Father Denis began to assist with the training of the youth of the parish right from his arrival. At the start of a training session in September 1980, prior to the commencement of rounds of the field, he warned his youthful athletes “Don't go racing!” Knowing that they would not heed him, as he recalled – “I took off my shoes and threw off the collar and told them I was going in front for two rounds, and you continue on then at the same pace”. What transpired was that he completed ten rounds and after a lapse of twenty-seven years, he was hooked on running all over again.

In October of that year, the first ever Dublin City Marathon was staged. When one of his twelve-year-old athletes, a Jer McCarthy, suggested that they should run the race the following year, Father Denis's initial reaction was “not in a hundred

years!” Young Jer was persistent though and with the ban on priests running competitively long since gone, Father Denis, at the age of 52, ran his first marathon in a sub-four hour time (3:48:42) – with Jer finishing twenty-seven minutes later.

Father Denis completed another twenty-two marathons between then and 2003, when at the age of 74, he completed his final race in 6:12:03, after which he quipped, “I wasn’t a bit sore after it”. Of the twenty-three marathons completed, twenty-one were in Dublin where he stayed with his brother, John, on the eve of each event. He celebrated Mass at John’s house on the morning of the marathon, and then John drove him into the city to take his place on the start line. After a marathon, he stayed overnight with John before taking a train to Charleville, where his older brother, Jimmy, awaited him. The other two marathons in which he partook were held in Cork, in 1982 and 1985.

The 1982 marathon in Cork was where he did a career-best time of 3:19:23 at the age of 53. Of the twenty-three marathons he completed, nine were completed in sub-four-hour times, with two more, just one and two minutes respectively outside this milestone. This was a remarkable achievement. Twenty-one of these marathons have documented times, but two years, 1994 and 2000, are unrecorded. The blank times for the unrecorded years mask the sheer determination of Father Denis. In at least one of these races, he had to have medical assistance for a period of time, and though the recommendation from medical staff would have been to retire, through sheer will-power he completed the race. In an act of typical sportsmanship he refused to accept his medal for taking a ‘break’ during the race, and this may indicate why these years do not tell the full story of a resolute and outstanding athlete.

Over the years, Father Denis won thirteen All-Ireland medals at 400, 800 and 1500 metres track and field events in Tullamore. The Castletown Ballyagran notes in the *Limerick Leader* of 4th September 1999, recalled that “In the All-Ireland Veterans Track and Field Championships held in Tullamore, parish priest Father Denis Browne won three medals, two gold and one silver, first in the 800m, first in the 1500m and second in the 200m”. The story concluded by stating “St Michael’s Athletic Club will always treasure the achievements of Father Browne”. He was seventy when he won those medals.

### *Pioneers*

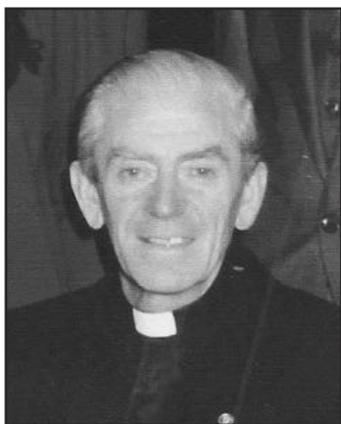
Father Denis had a lifetime involvement with the pioneers. He first became a member of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association during his school days. During his priesthood, he actively promoted the principles of the association in every parish he served. In his first parish of Glenroe, during the Christmas period of 1954, he organised a pioneer rally that was attended by over three hundred people from Glenroe and Ballyorgan.

His lifetime work with the association culminated forty-one years later, when on 8th October 1995, he was appointed as the Spiritual Director for the South Region. He held this post until 2009, five years after his retirement. The South Region included Ardpatrick, Kilmallock, Athlacca, Bruff, Croom, Fedamore, Donoghmore and Roxboro. It also included Dromina and Newtownshandrum, in County Cork.

Father Denis was passionate about the pioneers and he found a means to include his other passion in life – athletics – in the activities of the association. Annually, he organised a sports day for young and old members of the association, which members recall as “a great day out”.

### *Love of Grange*

As his sister, Cassie, recalled “Every summer Father Denis would spend two to four weeks holidays in Grange. Initially, this was in August, but he changed to July so as to get more daylight hours! He loved Grange and particularly Lough Gur. The family home, beside the stone circle, has a field at the rear that backs onto the shores of the lake. When Father Denis would go for a run, he would do some laps of the field so that he could take in the views of the lake. It was a place where he found so much peace in the beauty of the surroundings”.



Fr Denis Browne, in middle age.

His favourite time of the day to run was early in the morning, just as dawn was breaking. In that field, in the early morning, when all was quiet and the dew was still fresh on the grass, Father Denis must have found peace, serenity and spiritual uplifting, and time to lose himself in his thoughts and prayers, before the start of the day.

Cassie recalled a humorous happening when Father Denis was in Donoghmore Parish. It was July, and a parishioner wanted to organise a Mass to be said specifically by Father Denis. The requested Mass time clashed with his holiday plans for Grange. The parishioner tried valiantly to have the Mass said on the requested date and was slow in accepting ‘no’ for an answer. Still, Father Denis would not accede. There was bewilderment when the parishioner discovered that Father Denis was going but eight miles up the road to holiday at Grange. His nominated holiday time was not going to be disrupted!

### *Retirement*

Father Denis loved the natural beauty of Lough Gur, and he spent many long lazy hours relaxing on the water in his drifting boat, his packed lunch to hand. When he retired in 2004, he settled into a home that held so many good memories for

him. It was there, as a teenager in the 1940s, that he stopped off to visit his aunts, when on his bicycle travels. It was also there that his own parents came to retire in 1958, when his father passed the farm on to his son, Jimmy. Following his retirement, Father Denis became a great friend of many local people in the Grange locality. When his health began to deteriorate, Helen O'Dwyer, Grange Church Sacristan and another kind local lady, Mary Gallagher, were extremely good to him in caring for him and in taking him to ceremonies at Bruff Church.

People still speak of Father Denis with genuine warmth and affection. Cassie recalled that "People were just drawn to him, and they simply loved him". Not many people have that gift of natural appeal to others. He especially loved the youth, and he loved to bring a smile to their faces. Many people have recalled how he brought children to sports events, not just all over the county, but all over the country. One such occurrence was when he brought a group of children to an event in Donegal, and on the way home it was snowing heavily. The children wanted to run in the snow, so he stopped his car and let them run and enjoy the fun and innocence of the moment.

In 2013, Father Denis, due to failing health had, unfortunately, to leave Grange, and he moved to Milford House. On December 11th of that year, he gently passed to his eternal reward. He is sadly missed by the people of Grange who knew him. He is interred in Ballyagran Cemetery, the last parish that he actively served.

In September 2008, a stranger wrote to a national newspaper as follows. "I had the good fortune to have a short break in the beautiful area of Lough Gur, Holycross, Co Limerick, where each day I experienced a wonderful Mass celebrated in Grange Church by a retired priest. There are many faults in the Church but when one experiences such a wonderful spiritual experience, then one must be thankful that Ireland has priests who will give up their spare time to say Mass." This was an appropriate compliment for a unique gentleman.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

*References and Notes.*

- (1) *Thanks to Carol McCabe, Dublin City Marathon*
- (2) *Bureau of Military History 1913 – 1921, Statement by Witness Document No WS 785*
- (3) *Irish Examiner, 30-07-1942*
- (4) [www.askaboutireland.ie](http://www.askaboutireland.ie)
- (5) *Limerick Leader, various (1948-1999)*
- (6) *History Athletics Ireland*
- (7) *Article by Father Thomas J Ryan on occasion of funeral of Canon Denis Browne*