

THE PIONEER TOTAL ABSTINENCE ASSOCIATION

By John Carroll

I previously prepared an extensive article on the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association (PTAA) for the Bruff publication, *The Dawn*. The article set out the history of the Association and its activities in the wider area of Bruff, Meanus and Grange. This article seeks to provide a Grange perspective in particular.

The Pioneer Total Abstinence Association of the Sacred Heart was founded by Fr James Cullen SJ in the Church of Saint Francis Xavier, Gardiner Street, Dublin, on 28th December 1898. Fr Cullen was born in New Ross, Co Wexford, in 1841 and entered the Society of Jesus (*the Jesuits*) in 1881. Fr Cullen was always concerned with social issues, and his motivation in setting up the PTAA was to address the enormous damage that he saw excess alcohol was doing in the Ireland of the times. Many workers were heavy drinkers and alcohol was the greatest drain on the weekly earnings of the family.

He had four co-founders: Mrs A Egan, Mrs ML Bury, Mrs AM Sullivan and Miss L Power. All of them were women as Fr Cullen's early vision was of an all-female organisation which, through its prayers and sacrifice in pledging to abstain from alcohol for life, would provide spiritual support for people to abstain from alcohol. A very short time into the organisation, after much pressure from men to join, Fr Cullen extended the membership to all.

From the beginning, members – who joined in their thousands – pledged three things: to abstain from alcohol for life (which Fr Cullen referred to as “The heroic sacrifice”), to say the pioneer prayer twice a day, and to bear witness by wearing the pioneer pin at all times. The PTAA has always been underpinned by devotion to the Sacred Heart, and its emblem reflects this.

Fr Cullen was tireless and a good organiser. He put his considerable energies into building up the Association, which he founded. In 1905, after five years, there were 43,000 members. In 1906, there were 70,000, and by 1910 there were 100,000. In 1917, even though a considerable number had been expelled for failure to live up to the pledge, membership came to 250,000. In the 1950s, as many as one in three Irish adults were members. And even though membership has declined considerably since then, there are still more than 100,000 Pioneers in Ireland today.

The PTAA has been present outside of Ireland since early in its history. Structures in different countries and continents vary considerably. And a pluralist approach is taken to accommodate local needs while maintaining strong parochial and diocesan ties. There are currently PTAA organisations in Europe, Africa, Central/South America, North America, Asia and Oceania.

The Pioneers played a very important role in Irish society in the 20th century. The historian, Ulick O'Connor, claimed that the two organisations that contributed most to the building of modern Ireland were the Pioneers and the GAA.

The stated mission of the PTAA is: "To address the problems in society caused by excess alcohol consumption and drug usage. We do this through:

- Faith and prayer
- Self-denial
- Example
- Activities based on presenting alternatives to individuals, particularly the young
- Advocacy

Our vision – based on the love in the Heart of Christ, as expressed in The Gospels – is to help to build a society where people live to their full potential and alcohol can be enjoyed in moderation avoiding the ills that arise in society from excess in its use."

Fr Charles Davy SJ, the current Chairman of the PTAA states: "Though for many years its (PTAA) numbers have been declining in Ireland, the problem of the misuse of alcohol shows no sign of weakening. With all the energy we can muster we are seeking to work together, relying on the risen Lord to guide us so that creatively and courageously we make our contribution to repairing what is broken in Christ's earthly body, the Church and indeed beyond".

PTAA Established Locally

On 9th February 1953, twelve people met in Bruff with a view to setting up a PTAA branch, and the following November their aspirations became a reality. Following an application to Central Council, Dublin to form a Pioneer Centre, approval was received.

The history-making twelve were the following: Fr John Browne, Fr Edmond Houlihan, Sergeant John Reidy, Michael Russell, Mrs William Naughton and Elizabeth White from Bruff. Frs Browne and Houlihan were both serving as curates in Bruff at this time, Sergeant Reidy was the father of the renowned musician and composer Sean O'Riada, and Michael Russell was the Principal teacher in Knockainey National School.

Grange was represented by Richard O'Donnell, Thomas Hanrahan, John O'Dwyer, Michael O'Donnell and Aidan Raleigh. Patrick Fitzgerald from Meanus completed the group membership.

The February (1953) meeting was obviously well attended as the enrolment book indicates that fifty-five other applicants attended this meeting. Subsequent meetings were held in March, April and May to obtain new recruits, and the numbers who sought enrolment to the PTAA were seventeen, thirteen and eight respectively. By the end of 1953, the total number of applicants had risen to 122.

Fifty-three applicants were enrolled in 1954 and thirty-eight in 1955. The majority of these served the probationary period and achieved full membership.

The numbers who sought enrolment throughout the remainder of the decade remained steady: forty in 1956, twenty-eight in 1957, forty-nine in 1958, twenty-six in 1959 and thirty-five in 1960. Although not reaching the heights of the 1950s, applications continued throughout the 1960s. A lull in application numbers was experienced during the 1970s; however, numbers rose during the 1980s, mainly due to a policy of enrolment of students at national school level.

In December 1969, a PTAA branch was set up in Meanus, which remained in operation up to the mid-1980s. For the next couple of decades, the original branch, established in 1953, was known as the Bruff-Grange Branch. At the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Bruff-Grange Branch on 11th December 1969, the following officers were elected: Chairman – Michael Russell, Secretary – Peggy Walsh, Treasurer – Josephine Moloney and Spiritual Director – Fr James Neville.

The Bruff-Grange Branch lapsed after 1976. At a meeting held in September 1980, the lapsed branch was recommenced, and Michael Lombard of Grange was elected president. The titles “Chairman” and “President” are interchangeable.

Michael Lombard, a quiet man, a gentle giant, much respected in his locality of Grange and in the wider area, having been elected to the office of President of the Bruff-Grange Branch in 1980, was elected again in 1985 and in 1987. In 1982, the branch was honoured when Michael Lombard was elected President of the South Limerick Regional Council of the PTAA.

Fundraising/Donations

Both prior to the lapse of the Bruff-Grange Branch and following its reinstatement, fundraising was regular and successful. At the point of reinstatement, branch funds amounted to £54.60, not an inconsiderable amount at the time. Events included concerts, dances, socials, raffles, flag days, discos, quizzes and sweeps on the Irish Derby. It is noted that for the social held in February 1982, the people of Grange provided excellent catering.

Funds raised by the Bruff-Grange Branch were used judiciously over the years in a variety of ways.

1981 – £170, the proceeds of the social of that year, was given to the Community Council;

1982 – On foot of the February 1982 social, a holy water stoop and sprinkler was purchased and presented to Bruff Church and a further contribution was made to the Community Council;

1982 – A raffle was held on 10th December 1982 and the proceeds of £200 was given to Bruff Social Services;

1983 – On foot of the 1983 social, £100 was presented to Grange Church for the purchase of a holy water stoop and sprinkler. Smaller sums were provided to the Newtownshandrum Pioneers who were trying to revive their centre (the terms ‘centre’ and ‘branch’ are interchangeable) and to Bruff GAA Club, a contribution towards holding their dinner dance;

1984 – Following the social held in February 1984, a donation towards the procurement of a picture of our Lady of Perpetual Help and lights was made to mark a Novena to our Lady, held in Bruff. A contribution was also given to Grange Church for the purchase of a table. Following a raffle held on 4th December, in aid of Bruff Social Services, a donation of £115 was made. Also, a cheque for the amount of £100 was sent to the PTAA Central Office, Dublin;

1985 – Contributions were made to the Community Council and the Éire Óg Set Dancers in Grange;

1988 – A donation was given to the Tidy Towns Committee;

1989 – Donations were made to the Bruff Lourdes fund;

1990 – Donations were made to Fedamore Pioneers and the Limerick South Regional Council for their sports day at Meanus.

In addition to the foregoing, funds were used to make suitable presentations for a number of people, including members of the clergy, to mark special achievements and in appreciation of outstanding service to the PTAA and the area.

Outings

Over the years, the Bruff-Grange Branch organised several pilgrimages and excursions.

1982 – Pilgrimage to Knock (June), Excursion to Killarney (August);

1983 – Pilgrimage to Knock (June);

1984 – Pilgrimage to Knock (June), Excursion to West Cork (August);

1986 – Pilgrimage to Knock (June), Excursion to Tramore (August);

1987 – Pilgrimage to Knock (June);

1988 – Pilgrimage to Knock (May), Excursion to Killarney;

1993 – Pilgrimage to Knock (May) for visit of Mother Teresa;

The Réadóirí Talent Competition

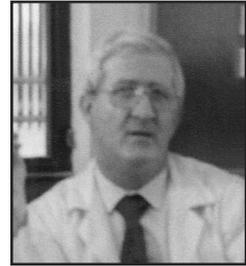
The Réadóirí Talent Competition is coordinated by the national leisure committee of the PTAA and brings the nation’s budding talent to the stage and produces a very high standard of competition. The variety of gifts, skills and abilities on display

from both young and old is often breathtaking. The Réadóirí Talent Competition consists of fourteen categories that include different types of Irish/disco dancing, drama, singing, poetry recitation, music and pageant. There are junior and senior age categories. Competition begins in October with local and regional finals and concludes in February with provincial finals and the All Ireland Final.

All competitors must be members of the PTAA and must also be members of the centre which they are representing on the date of the first round of the competition. The only exception to this rule is the ‘Super-brain Competition’. All competitors who are members of the PTAA must wear their appropriate emblem.

In 1988, a table quiz team from Bruff national school entered the Réadóirí competition, held at Kilmallock. However, they were prevented from competing as none of them wore ‘pioneer pins’ on the day.

In 1989, a quiz team from Bruff National School for boys, (wearing pioneer pins on that occasion!), competed in the regional Réadóirí competition held in Kilmallock in February and beat off all competition to win the event. The team subsequently went on to reach the Munster finals in April and performed remarkably well – they just missed out on a place in the All-Ireland Finals. The team members were Brendan Hennessy, Conor Cronin, Michael O’Donovan and John Carroll.



John O’Dwyer, University Hospital Limerick, Grange PTAA Representative.

In November 1989, the Bruff-Grange Branch enjoyed further success, taking first place in recitation (Carrie O’Donoghue) and second place in waltzing at the Regional Réadóirí Competitions (South Limerick).

Demise of the Bruff-Grange PTAA Branch

The branch lapsed until December 1990 when an extraordinary AGM was called. No meetings took place between December 1989 and this AGM. It was decided to re-affiliate the centre with the PTAA Head Office. New officers were elected including John O’Dwyer of Rahin, Grange, as president. In November 1991, John, who had worked tirelessly throughout his adult life for the Association, died suddenly, a massive loss to the Bruff-Grange Branch, which was due to celebrate forty years in existence in November of 1993. Though attendances at meetings had dwindled by late 1993, it was decided to continue to operate the branch. However, only six members attended the 1995 AGM. Consequently, it was decided against electing officers.

According to the minute books, the branch continued up to April 1997 when it permanently lapsed. The last entry in the minute book dates to April 1997. Canon James Costello mooted the idea of recommencing the branch in the 2000s but, alas, nothing came of it.

Michael Lombard

Following the death of Michael Lombard in 1999, the following tribute, written by Nora Hourigan of Lower Grange, appeared in *The Dawn*.

“The people of Grange and surrounding areas were shocked, in May 1999, at the unexpected death of the very well known, Michael Lombard. A larger than life figure, he was loved and respected by everyone. He was certainly one of nature’s gentlemen. Michael will be fondly remembered for so many aspects of his life, but the one that stands out must be his prolific contribution to the *Vale Star* newspaper, with his very popular weekly ‘Grange Column’, which was widely read and very much appreciated by all the local people. His contributions varied from week to week, but always showed the lighter side of the man, with his very funny anecdotes. One wonders where he got his inspiration. Perhaps, some people are born with an innate talent of one kind or another. Michael’s was certainly a special one. He also made an enormous contribution to the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association, of which he was a life member.

Thanks for the memories Michael, you were an inspiration to all of us, with your kindly word for one and all, and your charm and good humour at all times. We expect he is now regaling all his friends in his heavenly home, with many hilarious stories. We all miss him very much, as a man of his calibre is very hard to replace.”

References and Notes:

(1) Bruff-Grange PTAA Branch Records

(2) <http://www.pioneerassociation.ie>

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