

Alf Murray

As the first warm Spring sunshine of the year slanted across the green slopes of Milltown on the quiet shores of Lough Neagh on 12th March 1999, the gentle courageous soul of Alf Murray, Lurgan, sped softly to its eternal reward. At that moment, Ireland had lost one of its finest sons. His large family, in devoted attendance to the end, had lost a beloved father and grandfather from this life which he had graced with dignity, dedication and honour. The Gaelic Athletic Association, the Gaelic League and his community in Lurgan and further afield became the poorer for his passing.



Alf was born on Christmas Day 1915 in Dromore, County Down, to James and Jane Murray. His father was the local dedicated School Principal. He moved with his family, first to Derrymacash and then to Lurgan to reside in Ashgrove House in Tannaghmore North when his father finally came to teach and retire in the area. His primary schooling in Dromore and Derrymacash prepared him well and his superb intellectual gifts ensured a place for him in the prestigious St. Mary's Christian Brothers' Grammar School, Belfast. There was fostered his love for Gaelic Ireland, its culture, language and pastimes which was to stay with him to the end of his days. There, too, his youthful skills already evident on the football field were honed.

Alf's academic brilliance and natural athleticism came to full flower when he was awarded a teacher training scholarship to St. Mary's College of Education, Strawberry Hill, near London. He resided there with his brother, Peter and fellow townsmen, Eddie McLoughlin and Tom Keville and their lives would become entwined in the GAA and education down through the years.

When he returned fully qualified he spent a short probationary period teaching in Newry and Derrynacash before joining the staff of Tannaghmore Primary School where he was to become Vice Principal and Principal and span forty years of dedicated service. It was there I first saw him in the Autumn of 1939/40 striding across the playground a veritable Cuchulainn with the movements of a little tiger in the prime of his career as a superb Gaelic Footballer.

Two years later, having survived Junior and Senior Infants, I was fortunate to become a pupil in his third standard. I soon learned I was in the presence of greatness. Alf was a brilliant and challenging teacher across the full range of the curriculum. He was inspirational in his teaching of the Irish and English languages. He ceaselessly marked our exercise books with the red ink in his Parker pen: patiently led us through the Byzantine Labyrinth of problems in the old Fountain Arithmetic Book and the theology of the old penny Catechism. However the magic moments came at the P.E. lesson in the school yard when he took the old leather football from the press. First he softened it, to accommodate our growing hands and feet. We watched fascinated as he demonstrated the hand pass, toe tap and clean catch, knowing we could never equal his skill. He gave us a fool's pardon and took us to our garden plots to tell us of the rotation of crops and show us how to sow seed and reap the vegetable harvest later in the season.

Then came the historic day when he told us he was forming the first ever Gaelic Football team with strong emphasis on the Gaelic and how lucky we were to be able to wear the jerseys recently vacated by the victorious Railway Cup Ulster winners. He then showed us the bruise on his shin, reputedly put there by either Joe Keohane or Paddy Bawn Brosnan of Kerry and Munster when he ran rings around them to bring that Cup back to the lands of O'Neill. When he later handed me the goal keeper's jersey for our first games against Tom Keville's Emmetts and Harry McGarry's Clan Ogs, it was one of the big moments of my youth.

At this time of our foolish youth we were unaware of our Masters true greatness and variety of task. Besides being a leading county and provincial star at all levels as a player, he was an administrator at club and county level. At this time Lurgan had only one club in the town of any significance in the 30's, it was Clan na Gael and Alf, with his county colleague and later provincial medal winner, Eddie McLoughlin, were its leading players. In 1939 playing for the County, Alf almost singlehandedly broke the Cavan monopoly of the Championship in Ulster. He had already won an Ulster Junior medal with Armagh as Champions in 1935. All this led to his automatic selection in the half forward line for Ulster from 1937 until 1945.

His momentous years were his medal winning ones of 1942 and 1943 when, in the minds of most, the greatest ever half forward line of Alf Murray, Kevin Armstrong of Antrim and 'Sticky' Maguire of Derry came to the fore. Not satisfied with the playing of our native games, he took to administration in his club Clan na Gael and was soon County Secretary for Armagh, delegate to the Ulster and Central Council and became Chairman of the Ulster Council from 1946 to 1949. It was around this time that his vision became apparent for his own community in Tannaghmore, North Lurgan and District. He was aware of the need to strengthen the backbone of the Association, the local club. He began with stalwarts John 'Jaunty' O'Neill, Jimmy Rooney, Bill Dummigan and Jock McCafferty to resurrect a club in Tannaghmore and district once known as the Fianna or the Davitts and gave it the name of Chlann Eireann. Their orange jerseys with green collars and cuffs were never more proudly

worn than in Raparee Park, Derrymacash in 1945-46 when they won out over Crossmaglen Rangers in the final of the Junior Championship with Alf now a veteran in playing terms, encouraging all.

At County Board level he encouraged other local clubs - Clan na Gael, St. Peter's, Wolfe Tones and Sarsfields and soon he had a Lurgan League structured at Senior, Junior and Minor level with ancillary competitions such as the Green Cross Cup, O'Connor Cup, Cafolla Cup, Murray and McAvoy Cup. He encouraged other great Gaels like his brother Peter, cousin John Joe, brother-in-law John Byrne, Barry McGarry and a youthful Dan McAreavy in administration. He began the crusade with these men to have a shared club ground for North Lurgan at St. Colman's Park, Lurgantarry and assisted in the development of grounds in Lurgan and district. Next he led the formation of the North Armagh Board and soon the leather and sliothar was in the air from Tannaghmore via Lurgan, Portadown, Ballyhegan, and back along the Lough Shore through Maghery to Aghagallon in County Antrim.

He realised too that the promotion of our native games and Gaelic culture required good communication. Thus a mini-newspaper *Cloir Lurgain* was born and eagerly awaited by local Gaels each Friday for match reports - humorous articles and poems all under nom de plumes such as "Free Crow Spy". In reality these were written by Alf and Peter Murray, Jimmy McCann aided - by a young Harry Tipping in the columns of this newspaper. A flavour of the times was the ballad written after St. Peter's G.F.C. defeated a much fancied Clan na Gael fifteen in the final of the Green Cross Cup. The opening lines were: "You can hear the wails of Clan na Gaels For the tears they are a-flowing The Green Cross Cup is papered up And to Free Crow it is going" This verse it is said, inspired the Clans to go and win the first ever Ulster Club Championship. With native games and clubs well established and his playing days fully over, the great man now turned to ground development on a grand scale.



Alf Murray – middle row, third from left

He formed the fledgling Davitt Park committee in the middle Forties. Despite tempest and flow his organising genius saw the first modern County Ground opened in Francis Street, Lurgan on 1st June 1945 with a challenge" match between All Ireland' Champions Roscommon and our own Derry stalwarts. This organisation and development was a model for all future such developments within the GAA. Yet still all this was not enough of a challenge for this giant of a man. he never forgot that the roots of Irish culture and things Irish were in the native tongue. He spoke Irish fluently from an early age 'and supplemented his knowledge with annual visits to the Gaeltacht in Rosguill and Rannafast in Co. Donegal. It was no surprise when he was Chairman of the Ulster Council GAA that a motion was passed making Irish the official language of the meetings and reports.

His enthusiasm for the Gaelic League saw him form the first local branch in William Street, Lurgan and it flourishes to this day in North Street in the town. He was active in promoting the Sabhail na Paisti scheme, sending hundreds of young people to the various Gaelacht's in Donegal. At local level the annual Suill Phada is a monument to his memory. He wrote innovative text books for Irish classes at local and schools level, encouraged the wearing of the Fainne and all aspects of the oral and written language. By now most men would have rested on their laurels by taking to the armchair and reflect on the glories of the past. That was not Alf. Despite the past, Alf was only winding up for his second coming. He began in his own club, Chlann Eireann. Realising the fully developed club alive and leading in the community was the future of the Association. He had experience of this when he worked to found Lurgan Feis in the 1940's to widen the concept of Gaelic Culture to embrace Irish dancing, drama, storytelling and song.

Now the aspect of a GAA club would change for ever and Chlann Eireann was the model. How proud he was with his club members when the complex was opened in 1954 - hall - handball alleys - training ground. Over the years in nearby Kilwilkie, Clann Eireann Park was added and his crowning glory in recent years was the addition of the Hurling Field in North Circular Road. He was prouder still as long standing Chairman when, in Dublin in 1982, great Gael and club secretary the late Ambrose Lavery (RIP) received the AIB Club of the Year award at County, Provincial and All Ireland level. And was this enough for the great man? Of course not! From early in his administrative career he was involved in Central Council GAA. He formed as Central Council delegate, a particularly close friendship with the then General secretary of the GAA Padraig OCoimh. Alf chaired many leading committees at National level including Policy, Grounds and Finance. In 1964 it was no surprise when most counties in the land nominated and elevated him to the highest office in the Association - President of the GAA. Now all the experience of the past, on the playing field in the club and committee room, stood him in good stead and came to the fore. He became the first truly innovative President. He certainly was the most proactive rather than reactive, especially when joined by the late great successor to Patrick O'Keefe as General Secretary, Sean OSiochain.

Alf travelled the length and breadth of the land to vision clubs and counties in the ideals of Cuman Luthchleas Gael. His clarion call of 'Bring the Hurling Back' can be see in the progress now made in strong and weaker counties. Grounds have been fully developed and GAA clubs are at the centre of community / parish life. Even when the time came at the end of his Presidency in 1967, he did not leave the committee rooms of the Ceannarus at Croke Park. As a Past President he contributed to various committees and up until his final illness many leading administrators at all levels made their way to the Milltown for advice. As all great men do, his achievements could not go unnoticed. This was never his intention as he was the most humble of men despite his fame. However, he was

unique by the fact that he received, three life-time achievement awards. The Cuchulainn for his GAA achievement; the Gradam na Phiarsaigh for his contributions to the furtherance of the Irish Language and the Bank Of Ireland Hall of Fame, as an All Time Great Footballer. In the twilight of his career as a school Principal it fell to him to lead his school in continuous educational innovation. This he took in his still athletic stride. He was the gentle, guiding hand for parents, pupils and staff.

He was ever approachable, having only the best interests of pupils in their path from school to life in his heart and action. Despite all his fame, he was humble, respectful to others and giving of his all to his school and community. He was quiet and gently humorous in life but steely in his determination for the principles by which he lived - his Catholic Faith and his love for Ireland and things Irish and his true patriotism. Like all great men, I know, he would concede that all he did he could not have achieved alone. In these heady days in the 1940's he met, courted and won the fair hand of Miss Maire Downing of Derryhirk - not too far from his maternal townland of the Milltown.

She was the perfect patient, beautiful and loving partner for all their married life. He was grievously widowed at her untimely death in recent years. She had left behind his fulfilled family despite the tragic accidental death of their beloved son and brother, Ruairi. His strong son, Seamus and his beautiful daughters of whom he was so proud, Maire, Eimear, Niamh and Fionnuala, were a delight and comfort to him. In the end, the tallest, strongest oak falls and so it was with Alf. He bore his final illness with all the true courage, serenity and dignity he had shown in life. He was at peace with his strong faith in God, and his Church. He had served his country and community with the true patriotism of persuasion by peaceful means. As a final tribute, because he first introduced me to poetry in Irish and English, I quote from the poetry of Micheál O Guiheen, the poet son of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island off the Kerry Coast. It is from his poem "My Spirit will be in a Book".

I shall speak to all when I am hidden away,
Like a man of the tribe ever-lasting,
My voice will be heard on the lips of all,
Through the lips of all I shall come,
I shall never die, Though I shall be sent in
a white shroud to the church-yard,
Only my corpse will be sent there
My voice will bloom from age to age.

Go ndeannaidh Dia trocaire ar a anam dilis.

By Brendan McStravick (a past pupil)