

# ST MEL'S—THE LEITRIM CONNECTION

*Gerry Mangan Carrigallen—student in St Mel's 1962-67*

THE SEED FOR St Mel's College was sown by William Higgins, Bishop of Ardagh in 1832 when he appealed for funds to 'the lay gentlemen of recognised position in the diocese' to erect a classic seminary. Bishop Higgins had been a great promoter of education. In his letter appealing for funds, he pointed out 'that for the last few centuries, no classical seminary of any note has existed in the extensive and populous Diocese of Ardagh.'

In 1838 he also launched a project to build the new St Mel's Cathedral and laid the foundation stone in 1840. The onset of the devastating Great Famine meant that the cathedral project was much delayed, and the St Mel's college project could not commence. Bishop Higgins, who died in 1853, did not live to see either project completed. However, his vision was brought to fruition by his successor, Bishop John Kilduff, less than 20 years after the Great Famine. Although unfinished, St Mel's Cathedral opened on 24th September, 1856. Following appeals for funds in 1861 and 1863, the building of the College was completed and it was opened on 4 September, 1865. Sadly, Bishop Kilduff died shortly afterwards in 1867, aged just 47. His statue, erected in front of St Mel's College, honours his great qualities and achievements.

The overall aim in establishing the College was summarised by Bishop Higgins in his initial appeal for funds in 1832 in which he stated that 'I have undertaken to erect a house, where the youth of Ardagh, who may destine themselves either for the Church, or any other liberal profession, can from their tenderest years be habituated to virtue, and carefully instructed in classics and in science'. The College has pursued that aim, at least in its essentials, ever since its foundation, although it has had to be greatly adapted to meet the specific educational needs of succeeding generations of students and the evolving requirements of a changing world,

not least in recent decades.

To most outsiders, St Mel's is a 'Longford' educational institution. However, it is a diocesan educational institution for 'the extensive and populous Diocese of Ardagh'. A big part of Leitrim is in the Diocese of Ardagh including Aughavas, Cloone, Fenagh, Gortletteragh, Mohill, Bornacoola, Annaduff, Kiltubrid, Carrick-on-Shannon, Kiltoghert and Drumshanbo. The Diocese of Ardagh and Clonmacnois, to give its full title, also includes parts of Westmeath, Offaly, Roscommon, Sligo and Cavan. So it remains 'extensive and populous'.

This was brought home to me this year (2017) when my class had a reunion to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of completing our Leaving Cert. in 1967. There were 48 in our class in total, of whom 16 were day boys from around Longford Town, and 32 were boarders coming from other parts of the Diocese. A quarter of the boarders were from Leitrim. Roughly that proportion of boarders from Leitrim would have attended St Mel's over the period from its foundation until 2002 when the boarding school was closed.

An excellent book has been published this year (2017) on '*Selected Memories—St Mel's College*', on which much of this article is based. It covers the period from its foundation in 1865 to the 150th Anniversary of that foundation in 2015. The author is Denis Glennon a former student, teacher and Principal in St Mel's. He has done a marvellous job in drawing together so much material covering all those years. All of us associated with St Mel's are forever in his debt.

St Mel's is not just buildings, it is a community formed from the students, teachers, support staff and past pupils over the 150 years of its existence. The key leaders were of course the priests and lay teachers. At least 16 priests over that period were from Leitrim. The following became Presidents of the College, Rev Patrick Mac Gauran, Aughavas, 1889-93, Rev James Reynolds,

Dromerkane, Aughavas, 1940-44, Rev James Griffin, Gortletteragh, 1956-63, Rev James Faughnan, Annaduff, 1970-78, Rev James Bland, Fenagh, 1978-83, and Rev Frank Garvey, Drumsna, 1989-2002. Accordingly, for 33 of the 46 years from 1956 to 2002, the President of St Mel's was a Leitrim man! Fr Garvey's successor was Denis Glennon, the first Lay Principal of St Mel's and, as mentioned, author of 'Selected Memories'.

Outside the Diocese, St Mel's is probably best known for its prowess in Gaelic football. Probably Leitrim footballers achieved more success at provincial and national level playing for St Mel's in the last century than through any other competitions. St Mel's won the Leinster College's Championship for the first time in 1928. In the 21 years from then until 1948, inclusive, St Mel's reached nineteen Leinster senior finals, winning fifteen, including six in a row, and winning the double junior and senior titles on four occasions. The trainer of ten of these Leinster Championship winning teams was Fr Sean Manning, schooled in Drumshanbo NS before going to Mel's, and later to become a major force and influence in Leitrim football. The All-Ireland Colleges Championship began in 1946. St Mel's won it and the Hogan Cup for the first time 2 years later in 1948, with Fr Manning still the trainer.

St Mel's won the Leinster Final in 1951, but did not win any title for the rest of the decade. Tony Hayden, Bornacoola, who subsequently became one of Leitrim's all time great footballers, was a member of that team. Jimmy McKeon, Fenagh, was also a member. He subsequently studied for the priesthood and, newly ordained, returned to St Mel's as a teacher. He took over as trainer of the Teams in 1959 and replicated the success of his mentor and inspiration, Fr Manning. In the period 1959 to 1970 he trained five Leinster Championship winning teams, two All Ireland Champions, five Leinster Junior Champions and, appropriately, a successful Fr Manning Cup team. In the period 1961 to 1963 St Mel's were in four All Ireland finals in a row (plus one drawn game) and won two.

After Fr McKeon's departure, the Leinster Championship was won in 1971, but it was not until 1982 that the next Championship was won. In 1987 St Mel's won the Leinster

## SOME NOTABLE LEITRIM MEN WHO SERVED ST MEL'S



■ *Top Row—Presidents:* Rev Frank Garvey, Drumsna, 1989-2002 • Rev James Reynolds, Aughavas, 1940-44 • Rev James Griffin, Gortletteragh, 1956-63 • Rev James Faughnan, Annaduff, 1970-78 • Rev James Bland, Fenagh, 1978-83

■ *Bottom Row—Football, Drama:* Rev Sean Manning, Drumshanbo, 1937-48 • Rev James McKeon, Fenagh, 1959-70 • Dermot Gannon, Ballinamore, 1961-62 • Rev Thomas O'Brien, Drumshanbo, 1942-67

Championship and their fourth All Ireland Final. The trainer was a Clonguish man, Fr Peter Burke, (up to recently a much loved Parish Priest in Drumshanbo), who himself had captained the 1969 St Mel's Leinster winning team. In 1988 St Mel's won the Leinster Championship again on the 60th Anniversary of its first win in 1928. In that 60 year period, St Mel's had won 25 Leinster Titles. There were further Senior Leinster title wins in 1989, 1990, and 1994. In 2003, they won their 29th title in the 75 years since the first title in 1928. There were also many junior titles won during these periods.

Students from Leitrim played a major part in all these footballing successes over the years. Unfortunately, they are too numerous to list and it would be invidious to single some out. I make an exception for Dermot Gannon, Ballinamore, who captained the All Ireland winning team in 1962, just one of four to do so, and the only Leitrim man to achieve that honour. All the Leitrim players are listed in 'Selected Memories'.

A price was paid for the footballing success by those of us who could not make the grade in football. Due to limited resources the only other sport available for us was handball. (The alleys were demolished in 1984 to make way for a new extension opened in 1986!). In recent decades welcome provision has been made for most sporting talents with the introduction of basketball, soccer, rugby, hurling and athletics in which students from

St Mel's have won much success. There were also, of course, non sport activities the most notable of which was drama and music. Fr Tommy O'Brien, Drumshanbo, an excellent teacher of English, produced a number of plays in the period 1950-60, including two Shakespearean plays, Henry IV and the Merchant of Venice.

In 1967, the year my class did the Leaving Cert., Donogh O'Malley announced the introduction of free secondary education. That led to a major expansion of secondary education over the following decades. Compared to the 48 in my class in 1967, the 2015 Leaving Cert. class comprised 71 students, and the 2015 first year class, 95—all dayboys. Those in the past who would have went to St Mel's as boarders, now receive their secondary education as day-boys in their own locality travelling from home.

The distinctive 'boarding experience' in St Mel's is now a thing of the past. Those of us who had that experience have mixed feelings about it. I remember over 20 years ago comparing notes with Frank O'Flynn from Drumdart. Mohill, who had been in Mel's 60 years previously in the 1920s. We both were surprised at how little had changed between the periods we had spent there. We recalled the spartan existence, the cold in winter, missing home cooking, and at times the remoteness of the teachers, and the corporal punishment. We were at the same time very grateful for the education we received, at a time when few were fortunate

to receive it, the camaraderie, the memories, and the resilience we developed away from home when times were difficult.

The 137 years of the boarding school, 1856 to 2002, resulted as mentioned above, in students from Leitrim making a major contribution to St Mel's at all levels, not least in football. That contribution from the current generations of Leitrim students is now more dispersed over the schools they attend in their own locality. The sharp reduction in vocations to the priesthood has also meant that St Mel's has now become a fully lay administered school, since the first lay principal, Denis Glennon, was appointed in 2002. The route to teaching and administration in St Mel's, taken by so many priests from Leitrim, is no longer there.

What have 'graduates' of St Mel's gone on to do. The experience of my class might be fairly typical, although perhaps only for my generation. Most are parents with children and the range of occupations include priesthood, accountancy, banking, business, civil and public service, dentistry, teaching, and veterinary. Given the profound social, economic, cultural, technological, family and community changes taking place it is difficult to predict what experiences the class of 2065 will have to tell in 50 years time, when St Mel's celebrate its 200th anniversary.

*I hope that the contribution of Leitrim to its development during the first 150 years will continue to be fully remembered!*