

DOWN MEMORY LANE

Fr Gerry Comiskey reminisces about his years as Editor

I CAN'T REMEMBER who said that 'when you mix conviction with human beings something great happens'. Without a doubt, this is true of *The Leitrim Guardian* Committees over the last 50 years. I was privileged to be the longest serving Editor from 1991-2000.

During those years, of course, we had no internet and articles and photographs arrived by snail mail. The committee members gathered for a monthly meeting in Meehans in Drumshanbo. Quite often articles were brought from around the County, handwritten and had to be typed up by people doing a FÁS course in Ballinamore. I remember receiving a piece for publication that arrived in the diplomatic bag in The Department of Foreign Affairs on St Stephens Green from Washington. When I left the building I met a truck driver from Quinn's who was returning home to Derrylin via Longford. I sent the article and the photographs with him to Turners, the printers in Longford! How things have changed now. Thankfully there is less travel involved in gathering and presenting the material.

While I was editing 10 issues of the magazine, I had the pleasure of meeting and working with a long list of people who had great affection for our lovely county. Among those whose memory I will treasure is Dermot Gallagher. He launched the 1994 edition of our publication while he was Ambassador to the United States and Mexico. Dermot served 8 Taoisigh and 12 Ministers. When he died in January last, there was much praise for him. His funeral Mass in Ratoath, Co Meath, was most impressive. Cardinal Sean Brady and the late Martin McGuinness led the enormous congregation. A letter from Bill Clinton was read in which he paid a glowing tribute to an extraordinary diplomat and a very gifted public servant. Over the years I came to know him as a warm and engaging personality, well insulated from any delusion of grandeur. When he was with us on more than a couple of occasions we instinctively warmed in his

company. Without a doubt he loved Leitrim.

In the course of a wide ranging address at the launch on the 10th December 1993, Mr Gallagher said that he was privileged to launch one of the most outstanding and enduring success stories of the County: *'Looking through some back issues of The Guardian the first thing that struck me as remarkable was the timelessness of Michael Fox's vision when he launched the first edition. It was a vision that called for the revitalisation of the county's economy through three main resources—small industries, tourism and afforestation. Michael Fox's vision was right in 1968 and it is right in 1993..*

...At a personal level, I want to say how much Leitrim has meant to me throughout my life. I am one of the thousands who had to leave the county to earn a livelihood but no matter where I have travelled, part of my heart and soul has always been in and will always be in Leitrim. Here at home, our innate modesty tends to prevent us from blowing our own trumpet! But one fact is very clear to me. The education and upbringing I got here has proved to be a foundation of extraordinarily solid proportions.'

We got glowing reviews in several newspapers at home, in London, New York and Boston. Writing in *An Irishman's Diary* in *The Irish Times* soon after the launch of the 1994 edition, Kevin Myers had the following to say:

'Lacking any chic at all is The Leitrim Guardian, edited by Gerry Comiskey, is a splendid example of the still vibrant determination of the small communities of rural area to retain their community identity, even in exile. That such a county with such a small population could produce a magazine like The Guardian is a tribute not merely to the people who have worked so hard to create it, but also to the enduring pride in county and community of the people of the area.

It is curious, this passion for the county. It is a powerful feature of Irish life, invigorated and enlarged by GAA rivalries. Why should

two neighbouring baronies which have more in common with one another than with their county towns, each 20 miles distant, ally with those county towns than with one another? And counties are not native creations but the invention of the Normans; yet they command curious loyalties.

These are loyalties for the good. It is impossible to pick up a publication like The Leitrim Guardian without envying the vitality of affection and kinship which unites the people who belong to the community which produces it. It is not in the least second-rate—it includes works by Vincent Woods, John McGahern, John F Deane, Michael Harding and Padraic O'Farrell, as well as many fine articles by less well-known local names. It is professionally layed out, and it is suitably catholic, with that irresistible blend of local sport and history, of place and parish, bard and pitch.

This is the essence of first-rate community journalism. Lucky Leitrim.'

George Bernard Shaw in an address away back in 1907 said: *'I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege of do for it whatever I can... the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.'*

I have always taken inspiration from Shaw's philosophy. I think all of those who served *The Leitrim Guardian* over the decades were likewise inspired. I take this opportunity of saluting them and I thank those who worked with me over the years. I think we can be proud of our achievements.

I had the privilege of meeting many illustrious people to present *The Leitrim Guardian* to them. I will treasure memories of meeting and talking with Gordon Wilson on more than one occasion. Former President Mary McAleese was one of many who were willing to promote the magazine and the County for us.

We express our gratitude to all who helped us in any way over the decades.