Spanning the Millennium

Eugene Baxter a Leitrim Man for 100 years

***Bridie Baxter Dunne**—daughter of Eugene & Bridget Alice Baxter tells us about her father's long and happy life. Eugene reached the noble age of 100 years on Thursday, 16th November 2006.*

THE NINETEEN HUNDREDS or early twentieth century Ireland was still recuperating from the devastating effects of the famine of fifty years before, and was still chained in bondage by English domination and the ravages of war. Living conditions were the most basic imaginable; transport was by foot or horse and cart; the turf fire, the candle light and water from the well were the only available facilities, and women had not yet got the right to vote. Children were still being hired out at hiring fairs for a few pounds a year. It was against this backdrop of widespread poverty and political uncertainty that Eugene Baxter was born on November 16th, 1906. He was the eighth of Patrick Baxter and Ann Maguire's eleven children.

As he grew up, circumstances in Ireland, and in the world, went from bad to worse. Eugene was only eight years old when the First World War broke out. He vividly remembers the 1916 Rising and its dire consequences for Ireland, and the quarter of a million Irish who later joined the British Army and fought in The Great War. Eugene was already married when the horrors of the Second World War began and, although Ireland was not directly involved in WW2 in which over sixty million people lost their lives, it crippled the country further, and rationing of many basic requirements is still a vivid memory. But perhaps it is the Irish Civil War of 1922-23 that impacted most on his life. He emerged a De Valera follower, and though he never forced or tried to influence his family in any way in choosing their own political persuasions, he never changed his own political colours. Even now, in his hundredth year, he holds the title of honorary president of the Mohill Fianna Fáil Cumann, and he looks forward to voting in the next general election.

Recently, Eugene met the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. He is pictured here with some members of his large family

Eugene was always neat and tidy and well-dressed. Though not particularly tall, he was an impressive figure in any crowd. But he never balked at hard work. He quarried the stones that built his own two-storey, four bedroomed house, a remarkable achievement in 1936. But what was considered a fine house at that time would get no accolades now. It had no electricity, no running water and therefore no bathroom, and the only form of heating was from an open fire using the turf he made in the bog.

In 1937, the same year as Bunreacht na hÉireann or The Irish Constitution was enacted, he married Bridget Alice O'Rourke from his own parish of Drumreilly, and recently they celebrated their sixty-ninth wedding anniversary. Self-sufficiency was the order of the day and Bridget's home management and needlework skills were matched only by his prowess at farming. Eugene's vegetable garden was second to none. They and their eight children had an abundance of organically grown food, vegetables, fruit, potatoes, milk and butter. His 'pitting' of the apples and potatoes (the method used then to preserve them) was an art to be envied. Like all other farmers at the time, Eugene grew his own oats from which oatmeal for porridge was made. After cutting and threshing, the oats was carted to the mill, together with a load of turf to supply the energy, and the result was a binful of oatmeal that made the porridge for the family for a year.

Money being a rare commodity at the time, coupled with the self sufficiency of home-grown produce, Eugene could bring his entire purchases home from town on a bicycle. Eugene never opposed progress. In fact he seized it at every opportunity. When at last rural electrification came to our area in 1959, it was only possible to get it if all the households in the townland signed for it. He made sure they did. Always a placid and unassuming person, (I have no recollection of ever seeing him cross) he could win people over by his gentle persuasion. There were at least seven other households in our area at the time, mostly elderly people, many of whom feared the electricity, so the task was not easy. Eventually the light came on and my fondest memory is one old man's statement -

"God, Oh! God, think of it, when you turn on the switch over there, the light comes on over here. It's bewitchery"! Now our own children can't cope for five minutes without electricity.

Eugene's brother, Charlie, died in childhood and his sister, Katie, died at twenty-one from Meningitis. Another sister, Bridgie, went to England where she married and reared her family. Michael got married and only moved the short distance to Fenagh (in Leitrim) and Eddie lived at home with Eugene for most of his life as, unfortunately, he contracted M.S. at an early age. Four of Eugene's brothers, Paddy, Johnny, Francie, and Jim, and one sister Mary, emigrated to New York. The long boat journey was the only cross-Atlantic transport then, and in these days of technology making everything instant, it is hard for the younger generation to imagine that it would be at least six weeks before word could arrive back by letter to say they arrived safely.

He never owned or drove a car. Maybe he could have done, but educating his family was his financial priority. When I was going to college he had to sell two cows to get the first fee payment I needed. We can only appreciate the magnitude of that when we realize that two cows was quarter of his herd. Many, many years later I brought up the subject to him of selling the cows, and I remarked on his generosity. "Not at all", he replied with his usual smile, "one does what one has to do at any given time, and that was the right thing to do then. It was nothing special". He neither took, nor did he want, any compliment for his generosity. Both he and my mother realized, in the words of W B Yeats, that "Education is not the filling of the pail but the lighting of the fire".

His own pedagogy predated modern research and he passed on his views on the rewards of perseverance in an endearing fashion. As children he told us a story about a group of young people who were sent to pick plums. A prize was offered to the person who would have the heaviest weight picked in a given time. Everyone ran from tree to tree picking all the big ones in a frenzied race—everyone, that is, except Johnny. He sat on a branch in the middle of a tree filling his basket with big and small from the one tree. In the end the winner was, of course, Johnny. The reason for his success was that 'Johnny stuck to his bush'. We knew what he was telling us.

Eugene was a people's man, always ready to help a neighbour in need. He never put himself first. But his life was not all gloom and doom. He played the melodian when he was young and his brother, Eddie, played the violin. Together they often made the only music available in their local dance halls. His father died in 1944. At that time there was a year's mourning for the death of a parent so the melodian was put away for a year. When he took it out again it had come apart through dampness. Damp proof courses or insulation were unheard of then. He couldn't afford to replace it. I'm sure he missed it but if he did, he never said. He also played the kettle drum in the Drumreilly Marching Band. But above all he loves to sing. He still delights the crowd at every family gathering with his renditions in both Irish and English, a talent he has passed on to a number of his grandchildren. He played football with his local club, Drumreilly, and when his beloved Leitrim was playing Dublin in Croke Park in 1994, he was there to cheer them on. After the match he had his photograph taken with Bertie Ahern in a nearby pub.

Uprooting and moving house is a difficult enough task at any age, but changing one's whole way of life at the age of sixty-six is no mean feat. With none of his family interested in carrying on the family farm tradition, he met this challenge head-on. He sold his farm and house in Kilmore where he had lived all his life until now, and moved to, what was then, a small business in Mohill. He adapted to his new role as if it were second nature to him and soon became as much a part of Mohill as he had been of Kilmore. He joined the Legion of Mary there and he visited and helped people who were only marginally older than he. He also teamed up with the traditional Irish music group, the 'Wren Boys', where he played the role of Fear a' Tí, reaching the All-Ireland final of a competition in Killarney.

A man of great moderation in all things, always happy and who emitted happiness everywhere he went, he and his wife, Bridget Alice still live in their own home in Mohill, now a comfortable centrally heated one. He enjoys the progress but also relishes the past, and he is happy to accept whatever fate or the world throws in his path. He has retained his lovely gentle nature, is never depressed and he can interact with his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren who all love to visit him, and all of them affectionally call him Da. He can still entertain with a bar of a song and overall, he is a tonic to meet and know.

Eugene may not be tall in stature but he is a very big man indeed. In the words of his grandson, Fergus Redican, "Grandad is a legend".

Ní bheidh a leithéid ann arís.