

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

DENIS McDERMOTT



■ Tawnyunshinagh NS 1929—Pupils & Teachers—one of the many photos taken by Denis McDermott during his lifetime

WHILE LISTENING to a documentary on RTE Radio One on Nov 5th 2016 entitled, 'Then there was light', which recounted the story of rural electrification in Ireland, which commenced 60 years previously, I found my mind being transported to my maternal grandparent's home in County Leitrim. Nestled in the hills between Doagh and Thur mountains, in the townland of Blackmountain, approximately two miles from Kiltyclogher, stands the house where my grandfather, John McDermott and his brother Denis were born, in 1897 and 1895 respectively, and where they lived their entire lives.

Although I never met my great-uncle Denis, as he died before I was born, he was always part of my childhood as traces of his skill as a toolmaker, mechanic and inventor could be found all over the farm and in his workshop, where my cousins, brothers and I spent many hours playing during the summers, of the 1970s and

1980s, we spent in Blackmountain. My mother and her four brothers had a very close relationship with their uncle Denis and we grew up listening to wonderful stories of this gentle, kind and intelligent man.

Denis struggled with ill health throughout his life, as a consequence of developing measles when he was a child, which restricted him from attending school. He taught himself how to read and write by meticulously copying letters and words from newspapers and books when he was confined to bed for long periods of time. Denis had an innate knowledge of the fundamentals of engineering. He was renowned throughout North County Leitrim, from his twenties until his death in 1957, for his skills in a number of areas such as repairing watches, clocks, farming tools, mowing machines, engines, charging batteries and making spinning wheels. Unbeknownst to us as children, playing in the fields and in what remained

of Denis' workshop, we were always discovering prototypes of our great uncle's designs but were too young to understand or appreciate that the rusty piece of metal we were climbing on was the work of a very gifted man.

On the laneway to my grandparent's house the gentle sound of the Gornavannoge river can be heard. It was at this location on the laneway that Denis generated electricity for his home in 1942 by harnessing the water from the river and constructing a rampart and power house with a big wheel. Denis constructed every part of this hydroelectric system himself, and did it by using natural resources to make what he needed or recycled parts of old engines. This was four years before the ESB commenced Ireland's rural electrification scheme when they erected a pole in North County Dublin, and ten years before the houses in the townland of Blackmountain received electricity.