

# MANORHAMILTON'S MICHAEL FOX (1935-1987)

## Founder and first editor of the Leitrim Guardian

*Dominic Rooney*

### Background and early years

Michael Fox was born on May 29th 1935 to Thomas and Mary Fox (née Denning) in Amorset, Manorhamilton. One of eight children, four boys and four girls, he was the youngest of the boys. He attended the De La Salle national school in the town and continued his education at the local Vocational School before obtaining a position in Joseph Mitchell's grocery and hardware shop in 1950. He would spend the next eight years of his working life in this establishment. Even though Michael left school early, his character was heavily influenced by his parents' love of reading, language, drama and community involvement.

As a young man Michael joined several community associations — the Castle Street Band, the Seán MacDermott Dramatic Troupe and the Seán MacDermott GAA club. Michael featured with the minor footballers in 1952 and was a regular on the junior team by 1955. He was particularly interested in the administration side of things, becoming club secretary in January 1953 while still only 17 years old. In an attempt to improve the standard of football in the club and to rekindle interest in the game, Michael conceived the idea of running a seven-a-side street league during the summer months of 1955. Six teams took part in the league, which generated 'the most extraordinary football enthusiasm known, and the brilliant fiery games became the talk of the county' according to the *Leitrim Observer*. The competition, which was run again over the next two years, raised the standard of football in the area and led to Seán MacDermott's winning the county junior championship in 1958.

Michael was elected secretary of the North Leitrim Football Board in January 1955. GAA activities in the northern half of the county were then in bad shape. Many clubs were being decimated by emigration. Attendances at games had declined, and juvenile and minor competitions were non-existent. Michael tackled many of these



■ **Michael Fox in 1969** Photo courtesy of Kathleen Fox

issues very effectively in the GAA column, which he wrote in the *Leitrim Observer* under the pseudonym Gael Óg. Michael's writings generated a terrific energy and enthusiasm throughout the whole county. A more united front developed between north and south. Football improved so much that the county team was now competing with the best in Ireland, while North Leitrim teams were dominating county championships. Michael contributed a total of 114 Gael Óg columns to the *Observer* from 1954 to 1959 without any remuneration or reimbursement of expenses. He later stated that the enjoyment his articles brought to readers, and the benefit to the association, engendered satisfaction in itself.

### A change of career

In his early twenties Michael decided to become a policeman like his father and older brother Pat. He joined An Garda

Síochána on 24th January 1958 and began his training in the Phoenix Park Depot in Dublin. On completion of his six months formation, he served in a number of stations in the Dublin area, before being transferred to the town of Hospital in East Limerick on 11th July 1961. He quickly immersed himself in GAA activities, lined out with the Hospital football side and even figured on the Limerick county junior selection. But he became best known as a referee and had charge of many county senior, minor and juvenile matches. While stationed in Hospital Michael married Kathleen Long from Borrisoleigh, Co Tipperary whom he had originally met in Dublin where she was working in the Civil Service. Their eldest son Thomas — the first of five children — was born a year later.

Despite living so far away from Leitrim, Michael never lost his love for his native county. He often dreamed of doing something, which would benefit his fellow



### ■ The young Garda, 1958

*Photo courtesy of Helen McNassor*

county men and women. With the renewed interest in nationalism in Ireland in 1966, he began working on the draft of a play depicting Leitrim's nationalist stand during the War of Independence. He also contemplated writing a biography of Séan MacDiarmada, and carried out a series of 14 interviews with well-known surviving associates of the patriot. These included Denis McCullough, Kathleen Clarke, Ernest Blythe, Eamon Dore, Min Ryan, Cathal O'Shannon, Liam O'Briain and President DeValera. Neither of these two projects ever came to fruition, although Michael would later use some of his research material in another venture.

### The Leitrim Guardian

On 15th November 1967, at the age of 32, Michael was promoted to the rank of sergeant and three weeks later assigned to Kilfinane, some 12 miles from Hospital. Once again he became involved in local GAA affairs, and as secretary, kick-started a floundering Kilfinane club. Within a year of his arrival, though, Michael's thoughts and concerns were refocusing on his native Leitrim. Even from such a distance he could see that the county was in serious trouble due to continuous emigration and increasing unemployment. Moreover, the 1961 Electoral (Amendment) Act had split the county in two and there was a danger that Leitrim would be even further carved up in the 1969 Act, which might result in its disappearance entirely from the political map. Morale was at a low ebb within the county, co-operation between local communities was negligible and leadership was sorely lacking.

He decided to intervene by launching a

new county magazine. Its dual purpose would be to give hope, confidence and pride to Leitrim people at home, and to portray a better image of the county to outsiders. In it he would argue strongly for a revitalisation of the county's economy through small industries, tourism and forestry. Industry and tourism would be developed in line with our traditional values and culture. State tree planting would be replaced by planting and ownership by the small farmers of the county. He wanted the poor mouth approach of a dispirited and depressed population to be superseded by a new buoyant optimism made possible by community leaders preaching the Gospel of self-help. He would call for more hard work and dedication by Leitrim people themselves and he wanted the media to be used to convey the image of a new revitalised Leitrim.

He then set about trying to convince people from various parts of the county of the contribution such an annual magazine could make to Leitrim's survival, development and growth. Few responded positively to his appeal, as they could see the difficulties, problems and the endless, thankless hard work involved. Although he insisted that he would do all the work they were not convinced, since he lived 185 miles from Leitrim. However, some support was forthcoming from people such as Leo Heslin, Jude Flynn, Fr John Young, Josie Martin and Francis Mitchell. At this point he set up a meeting with Frank Crawford, manager of the Munster and Leinster Bank in Manorhamilton. Crawford believed in the venture and provided him with a personal loan to launch the magazine. Michael then co-ordinated the task of securing businesses to advertise in the new magazine.

The title he chose for the annual—*The Leitrim Guardian*—was taken from the name of a weekly newspaper which Charles J Dolan from Manorhamilton had founded 60 years previously, to help him to try and win a seat for Sinn Féin in the 1908 Leitrim North by-election. As members of An Garda Síochána were prohibited from holding any other employment or engaging in any trade for profit, Michael decided to edit the *Leitrim Guardian* using the pseudonym Gabriel Martin. This was purely a precautionary tactic, designed to cloak from his superiors the extent of the task he was

undertaking. It was never his intention to benefit in monetary terms from the venture. In fact he had made it clear from the outset that 'the profits of the magazine are being devoted to the advancement of Leitrim and its people'.

Michael devoted all his spare time during the summer of 1968 to his new magazine. He often left Kilfinane after finishing his shift, arrived in Manorhamilton in the early hours of the morning, kept several appointments in various parts of the county and carried out research on the articles he was writing. He would then drive back the next day to begin another shift. At times he was physically exhausted by the huge effort he was making. But by the end of September he was able to write to a friend to say that he was 'heading for The Kerryman Printers in Tralee with all the edited data'.

In launching his new publication Michael strove for excellence in both content and presentation. His choice of the colour photo of Glencar Waterfall for the front cover was meant to illustrate the beautiful scenery that is located in Leitrim. He also wished to give people a sense of pride in their county by recalling stirring episodes from Leitrim's history. He himself contributed an article about Charles J Dolan and the 1908 by-election. Eamonn Dore, bodyguard of Séan MacDiarmada from 1914 to 1916, detailed his personal reminiscences of the Leitrim patriot whom he called the chief architect of the 1916 Rising. Michael Whelan traced the Leitrim background of Tom Clarke, another 1916 signatory, and Fr Dan Gallogly wrote an account of the 1921 Sheemore ambush. Michael Fox also detailed the heroics of the Leitrim minor football team, which reached the All-Ireland Final in 1956.

Michael commissioned 5,000 copies of the magazine and had them transported from Tralee to outlets and promoters in Leitrim and elsewhere. The 100 page publication, priced at 5/=-, was launched in Kinlough at the end of November 1968. The northern village was chosen because it had won the Bórd Fáilte tidiest town in Leitrim competition earlier that year. To honour the community's achievement, co-operation and hard work, and to encourage other towns to follow its example in the projection of a new image for Leitrim, Michael awarded a *Leitrim Guardian* prize of £100 to the Tidy Town's Committee.

Despite the successful launch, there were

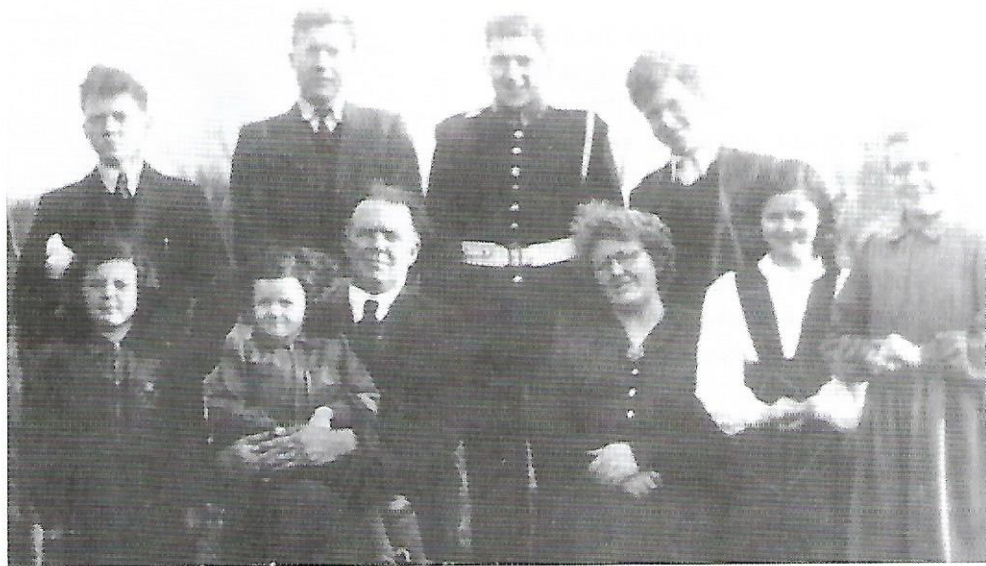
few reviews of the magazine in the national or even the local press. Michael felt very much removed in Kilfinane from what was happening in his native county. Even at the end of January 1969 he was asking what the general Leitrim reaction was to the *Guardian*. It was only in March that the first letters of appreciation began to arrive. His major concern, however, was the fact that the sales of the magazine were disappointingly low. He had hoped originally that every householder in the county would buy a copy, but this did not happen. He appealed to his friends and supporters to make 'a further serious sales assault and undertake a door to door campaign if necessary'. Despite these additional efforts, he was still left with a debt of almost £600.

### Not a quitter

Undaunted and undeterred, he resolved to continue on and plan for a second edition of the *Guardian*. He organised his small group of friends and supporters into an ad hoc administrative council, but still retained overall control of the project himself. His reason for doing so was because the loan he had negotiated with the bank was a personal one, for which he alone was responsible. He then set about securing an increase in his overdraft, in order to enable him to discharge his outstanding liabilities.

Conscious of the importance of self-help if Leitrim was going to survive and progress, and wishing to develop a sense of self-pride and leadership within communities, Michael devised a Progressive Towns competition, the result of which featured prominently in the second edition. The competition was sponsored by Leitrim native and nationally known entrepreneur Pat Quinn of Quinnsnorth. Ballinamore was declared the winner of the prize of £100 by judges Jude Flynn and Padraig White. The competition, which attracted huge interest and engendered much friendly rivalry, played an important part in raising morale and inculcating self-belief in communities throughout the county. In subsequent years the prize money was increased to £200 and the competition was won in turn by Manorhamilton, Mohill, Dromod and Drumshanbo. A separate rural section was also introduced with Carrigallen/ Aughavas, Glenfarne and Cloone taking the honours.

The 144 page second edition (1970) of the *Guardian* was launched in Ballinamore



in November 1969. Although it maintained the high standards of its predecessor, with articles covering all aspects of Leitrim life, it once again failed to generate adequate sales to cover production costs. In fact the debts associated with this edition amounted to £1,000. In an attempt to raise much needed funds, Michael devised a Life Patronage Scheme whereby, in return for a donation of £10 (or \$25) patrons would receive a copy of all future editions of the magazine posted to them. An initial appeal, however, only generated 50 patrons.

Michael was not one for quitting, though, as he was still absolutely passionate about the magazine. Not only was a third edition produced, but it had an enlarged and modern-looking format with an eight page colour spread. Its strikingly beautiful cover depicted the new marina in Carrick-on-Shannon, which was indicative of the significant development that was beginning to take place around the county. Michael succeeded in persuading the then Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, to launch this 1971 edition in Manorhamilton. Incidentally, it is still recalled that, at the launch, Michael made an unscripted speech, which was so literate and well delivered that the Taoiseach asked him if he would become his scriptwriter.

The 1971 edition was also the one in which Michael initiated the *Person of the Year* award for 'meritorious effort on behalf of the county'. The winner, who was chosen by open poll in the *Leitrim Observer*, was Joe Mooney of Drumshanbo. This edition of the *Guardian* was a sell-out. The Life Patronage Scheme also succeeded in attracting over 100 members. And although

■ **The Fox family in the late 1940s.**  
**Front Row: Helen, Phil, parents Thomas & Mary, Margaret & Mary.**  
**Back Row: Michael, Pat, Joe & Tom.**  
*Photo courtesy of Helen McNassor*

Michael wrote in February 1971 'I am still being pressed for payment by our creditors' and again in June 'the bank will not extend our OD until we clear the last lot', great steps had been taken towards reducing the crippling debts which had threatened the viability of the magazine. Things were also looking much brighter in Leitrim generally, with the editor stating that 'we are encouraged, excited in fact, by the change which we see taking place throughout the county. There is positive evidence of a renewal of pride by our people in themselves and a growing confidence in the future of the county'.

Following the depressing census results later that year, however, which revealed that Leitrim's population decline headed that of the country at 7.4%, Michael warned against apathy and despair in his 1972 editorial. He demanded that Leitrim be treated by the government as a special development area, in which an accelerated expansion of tourism and industry would be prioritised. He stated that there was such an upsurge of civic spirit and pride in the young people of the county that they deserved to have demonstrated to them that the institutions of the state were there to help the efforts being undertaken.

He also reminded readers in the same edition of the background battle being waged to achieve the publication of the

magazine. 'How many realise that its survival depends on the reservoir of self-sacrifice, enthusiasm and zeal issuing forth from a group of dedicated people, everyone giving voluntarily of themselves to the ideals so espoused? We are a pen and pencil brigade, with no office, no staff, no equipment, no professional expertise, merely our own peculiar love of Leitrim, some imagination and a little guts. In giving birth to this magazine we challenged all the odds, with your support we can continue to lick them'. He obviously felt that such an attitude was essential if the county—like the magazine—were to overcome the obstacles.

As the *Guardian* had now gained solvency, Michael was keen that the administrative council play a greater role in its affairs. So, in August 1972 the structure of the council was reorganised. Michael was reappointed editor with control of production and editing, while the council became responsible for administration, finance and marketing.

In the 1973 edition of the magazine Michael introduced the MJ McManus Award to encourage literary excellence and to honour the many unselfish contributors to the magazine who gave their services without charge. The Award was conferred that year on Gus Martin of Ballinamore and UCD. This was just the latest of several awards which had all been made possible through the generous sponsorship of Leitrim benefactors whom Michael had brought on board over the years. They included Pat Quinn of Cloone and Quinnsnorth, Irish American Tom McCartin, Raymond Laird of



■ **Michael with An Taoiseach Jack Lynch at the launch of the 1971 *Leitrim Guardian* in Manorhamilton.**  
*Photo courtesy of Helen McNassor*

Drumshanbo, Frank Quinn of Cloone, Noel Gaffney of Ballinamore and Chicago, Ray McSharry TD and John D Leonard of Manorhamilton and Cardiff. During his time as editor, Michael carried out in-depth surveys on Agriculture in Leitrim (1970), The EEC and Leitrim (1972), Tourism in Leitrim (1973) and a study of the effectiveness of the voluntary associations in the county (1974). He also personally contributed several articles for each issue of the magazine.

### Community leadership in Kilfinane

By 1974 Michael was finding it impossible to devote adequate time to his *Leitrim Guardian*. He and his wife Kathleen now had

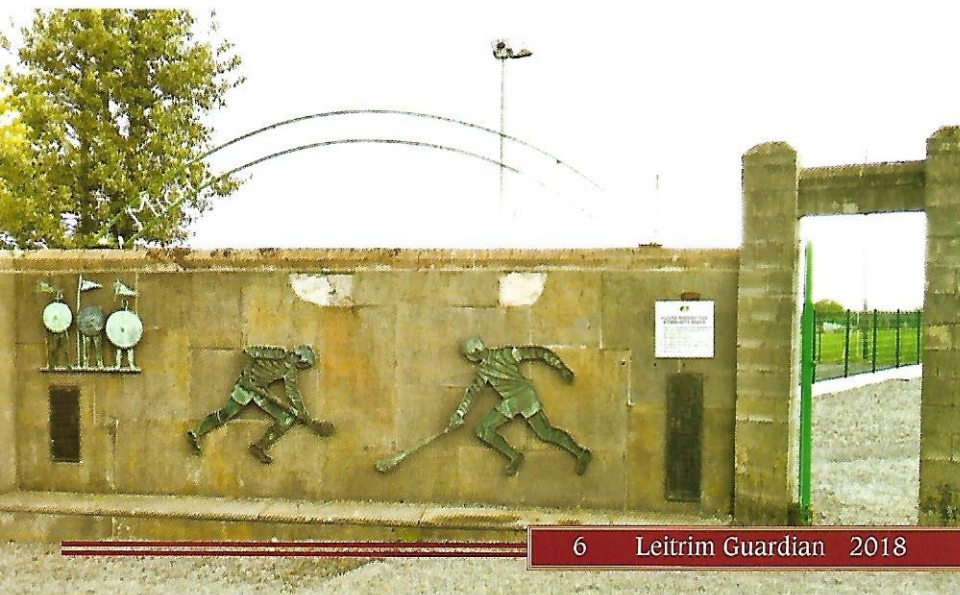
four young children. He was also becoming more and more involved in various community activities in Kilfinane. But the factor which finally prompted him to cut his ties with the magazine was his secondment to the Phoenix Park Depot to participate in the research and writing of the official textbook Crime Investigation Techniques—the training manual for every Garda recruit.

Upon returning to Kilfinane on the completion of this assignment, Michael threw himself into various community activities and became the driving force behind several projects. As chairman of the local GAA club, he spearheaded a fundraising campaign to erect a modern sports complex in the town. This monumental task took ten years to come to fruition, but a magnificent £300,000 facility was eventually completed in 1987. As chairman of the local secondary school's parent teacher association, he threw his weight behind the drive for a new school. This building—Scoil Pól—was also completed in the same year.

These two projects, however, in no way summed up the extent of his involvement

### ■ **The Michael Fox Memorial Park in Kilfinane, Co Limerick**

*Photo courtesy of Emmet Fox*



in the life of Kilfinane and South Limerick. During the 1980s he occupied key positions on nine different committees. These included chairman of Bruff District Social Club, president of Kilfinane Boys Club, chairman of Kilfinane Festival Committee, chairman of the South Limerick Scór Committee, member of the Kilfinane parish council, member of the National Executive of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors, and branch secretary of that association in the Limerick area.

Michael died suddenly from a heart attack on 11th May 1987. He was just 52 years of age. His untimely passing could be attributed to overwork, community involvement and his persistent reaching for the stars. St Andrew's Church in Kilfinane was packed to capacity for his funeral Mass, and all the shops in the town closed during the service and funeral. His coffin, draped in the Tricolour, was carried shoulder high by his colleagues to the hearse, while other Gardaí and representatives from various associations formed a guard of honour. All GAA meetings in the county were cancelled as a mark of respect.

■ **Seán MacDermott's Manorhamilton Junior Football Team on 24.07.1955. Michael Fox is standing on the extreme left**  
*Photo courtesy of Kathleen Fox*



## Legacy

At Michael's funeral Mass, Canon O'Dea, PP, stated: 'Kilfinane does not yet realise what it has lost. It is very unlikely that we shall see his like again. Of one thing I am sure, he will not be replaced here. All you have to do is observe the many projects he threw his weight behind. The sports field and school above all else will remain as monuments to the memory of this great man and his unselfish dedicated work'. The Sports field Committee later honoured his memory by naming the complex The Michael Fox Memorial Park.

Michael had already made a lasting contribution to the GAA in his native county before his departure to join the Guards in 1958. *The Leitrim Observer* referred to 'the magnificent work of this most zealous and enthusiastic Gael', describing him as 'one of Leitrim's most outstanding GAA personalities'.

But Michael's most striking legacy to his native county has to be the *Leitrim Guardian*, which he almost single handedly founded and financed. The magazine is now 50 years in existence—thanks to the dedicated editors and members of the adminis-



■ **Michael with his hero Packie McGarty (centre) and Jim Lynch (left) c.1954.** *Photo courtesy of Kathleen Fox*

trative council who took over the mantle of Michael Fox after he retired. We owe these people a huge debt of gratitude. The magazine is needed today as much as it ever was and is dependent on Leitrim people everywhere purchasing a copy. Leitrim will always have to work hard to achieve recognition and success. The greatest tribute we can pay to the memory of Michael Fox is to ensure that the magazine continues indefinitely. No one can afford to become complacent or 'this unique journal which captures the voices of Leitrim people from across the world' will be lost forever.

*Finally, I wish to thank Michael Fox's widow Kathleen and her family, his sister Helen, his Guardian colleague Jude Flynn, and Prin Duignan for their assistance with this article.*