

FR MATTHEW O'CARROLL 1891-1982

Fr Gerry Comiskey recounts the story of a heroic Chaplain from Dromahair



IN LATE 1884, Dr James O'Carroll was appointed medical doctor in Dromahair, at the age of twenty five, replacing Dr Hamilton who had retired. His appointment was hailed as a victory for the Nationalist population. Francis La Touche was Chairman of the local dispensary committee and he backed the only other candidate, Dr Rowan, of Skreen, Co Sligo. Dr O'Carroll was appointed by a majority of one vote; receiving ten of the nineteen votes. Tradition says that the efforts of Fr Patrick Cooke CC, Glencar, were crucial in getting O'Carroll appointed. Both were from the parish of Killann in East Cavan. Tradition also has it that when the election was about to take place in Stanford's Pub, it was discovered that one of the Nationalist committee members had failed to arrive. He was Harry Banks of Ballinagar who at that time was old and in poor health. Fr Cooke decided to go and bring Mr Banks to Dromahair. He mounted his car and with Tom Devaney of Mulcan, Glencar, driving the horse, he went to Banks' house. The man was in bed but Fr Cooke helped him to dress and



putting a rug around him and his own overcoat, he hoisted him up on the car and drove him to Dromahair where he cast his vote for Dr O'Carroll. It is said that Dr O'Carroll called one of his sons 'Harry' after the man who elected him in Dromahair. Dr O'Carroll died in 1940 aged eighty one. An account of his funeral in the *Leitrim Observer*, dated 3 August 1840, mourns the death of one of Leitrim's most respected and best known figures. Rev J McKeon, preached the panegyric. He said: *'It would be no exaggeration to say that there was not a house within a very considerable radius*

■ Fr O'Carroll, top right, and above centre, at the Pyramids in Egypt c. 1920

that has not in some member of its family benefitted by the kindly attention and professional skill of their deceased friend. He was more than a friend, he was a shining example of what a Catholic layman's life should be. Morning after morning, in all kinds of weather, and at all seasons of the year, whoever might be absent from morning Mass, there was always one person who could be seen there—Dr James O'Carroll'.

Tradition has it that Francis La Touche, the landlord's agent, was taken seriously ill a short time before the building of St Patrick's Church, in Dromahair. When the efforts of a couple of Sligo doctors failed to bring about a recovery, he was advised to consult the young Dr Harry O'Carroll, who had already established a fine reputation in the locality. La



■ Ten of Fr Matt's medals

ADDRESS



REV. MATTHEW O'CARROLL

On the occasion of his Ordination and of his volunteering as Chaplain to the Forces.

DROMAHAIR

DEAR FATHER O'CARROLL

WE your immediate friends and neighbours, beg to offer you our heartiest congratulations on your recent ordination, and we take occasion of this opportunity of testifying to you our delight on your elevation to the priesthood. We know you since your infancy as a model member of a model family, and your meekness, piety, and Christian charity are sure to secure for you a brilliant career in the Church.

BUT we have another reason for felicitating you on this occasion, and it is because of your priestly, courageous, and manly determination to volunteer your services as Chaplain to the Forces at the front. We feel admiration for anyone who foregoes the pleasures and comforts of life to engage in a noble cause or to work in the interests of others, but yours is the greatest and noblest of all causes—the salvation of souls. We know that on account of the sacrifices of your family in the great war that the call of duty was less clamant on you than on many others, for we have vividly in mind the part played already by your two heroic brothers—one, who, by his ability, has attained to the eminent rank of Captain in the Veterinary Corps, and the other, though tenderly reared and qualified by his brilliant career as an intermediate prize-winner to gain honour in any intellectual walk of life, has elected to take his place as a private soldier, and, although wounded once, volunteering again, and now once more in hospital.

IT is a noble record for a family that has long been distinguished, for we all have experience of the zeal and ability of your esteemed father, who has come to be recognised as one of the most eminent medical practitioners in Ireland. He has long been noted for his solicitude for others and for his devotion to duty, and we are glad to see that the same characteristics mark the son.

IN normal circumstances we should regret that you are not starting your priestly mission amongst us, but as it is, we are proud to admire so much determination and self-denial in a fellow-townsmen. We also regret that we are precluded from offering you a more substantial proof of our appreciation. But when the warring nations are once more at peace we hope to see you return to start life afresh under more peaceful and less trying circumstances. The example of your action in the great war will be an ideal one for your people to follow, and they will love and venerate the gallant young priest who braved all for the spiritual welfare of others.

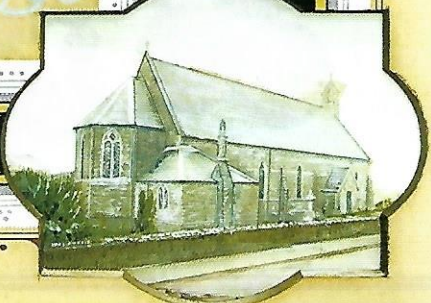
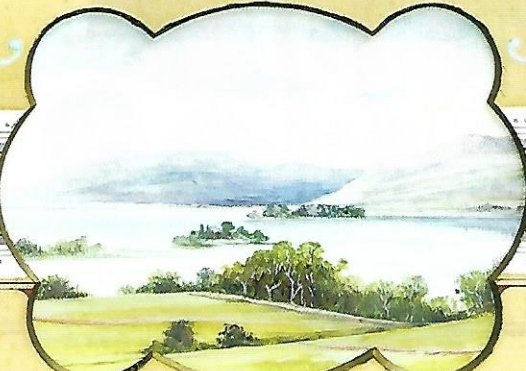
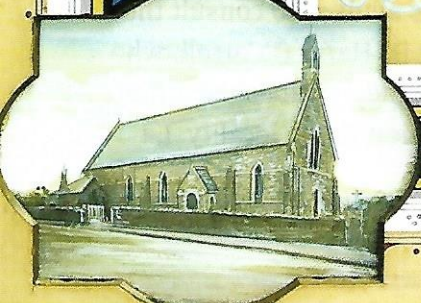
SIGNED on behalf of Subscribers,

Thomas Fallon J.P.,
Chairman, Leitrim County Council.

James McFowan D.C.

John Waters
Ex. Dist. Insp. R.I.C.

John O'Shea
Francis Crownl B.A.



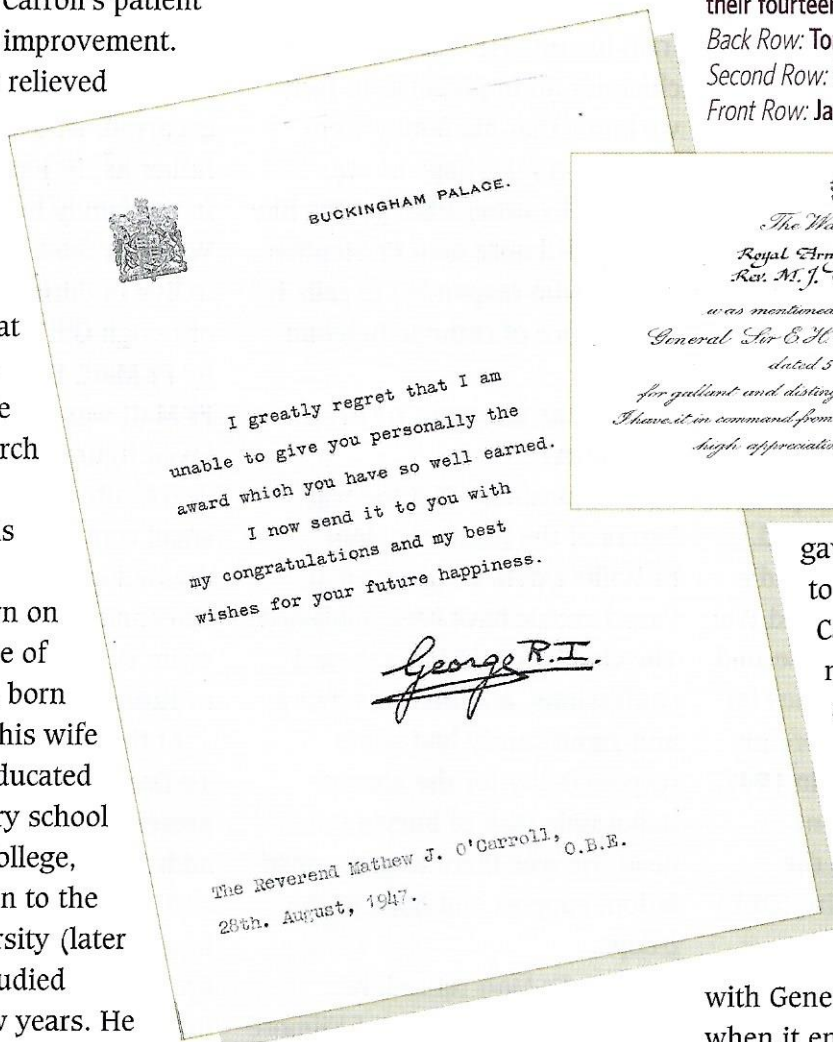


■ Dr & Mrs James O'Carroll with twelve of their fourteen children.

Back Row: Tom, Mollie, Matt & James
Second Row: Susan, Eithne, Brendan & Nan
Front Row: Jack, Harry, Ita & Eily

Touche became O'Carroll's patient and made a rapid improvement. He was extremely relieved and very anxious to suitably reward the doctor. According to tradition when O'Carroll asked that payment be made by providing a site for a Catholic Church in Dromahair, La Touche granted his request.

Fr Matt was born on 20 April 1891, one of fourteen children, born to the doctor and his wife Minnie. He was educated at the local primary school and St Patrick's College, Cavan and went on to the then Royal University (later UCD) where he studied medicine for a few years. He



The War of 1914-1918.
Royal Army Chaplains Department
Rev. M. J. O'Carroll, T/C. to 3, 4th Cl.
was mentioned in a Despatch from
General Sir E. H. H. Alleny, G.C.B., G.C. M.C.,
dated 5th March 1918.
For gallant and distinguished services in the Field
I have it in command from the King to record His Majesty's
high appreciation of the services rendered.
Lieut. Genl. Chamberlain

gave up his medical studies to enter the Seminary in Carlow and on his Ordination in 1916 he immediately volunteered as a Chaplain to the British Forces in the Great War.

He served with the Egyptian Expeditionary Force against the Turks and was with General Allenby's Army when it entered Jerusalem on

◀ The illuminated address presented to Fr O'Carroll on his ordination on 10th Dec 1916



9 December 1917, a historic occasion as the city had been in Muslim hands since the crusades 600 years earlier. One of Fr Matt's contemporaries in the campaign was T E Lawrence, the famous '*Lawrence of Arabia*'. Fr Matt himself was mentioned in despatches by Allenby in March 1919 for "gallant and distinguished service in the field".

After the 1914-18 war, he continued to serve as a chaplain to the forces all over the world. He was again sent to the Middle East during the Second World War and in June 1942 was for a second time mentioned in despatches for distinguished service. Before his retirement from the Army in 1947, with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, he was awarded the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by King George VI.

Matthew O'Carroll's decision to join the British Army as a chaplain

encapsulates the complexity of Irish history. He was not a monarchist nor an imperialist; in fact, we know that his family were nationalists. Perhaps he was inspired by other Irish priests like another Kilmore man Fr Stephen Clarke, who responded to calls for the defence of catholic Belgium.

What was the role of an army chaplain?

We are fortunate that the war letters of the Jesuit chaplain Fr Willie Doyle who served at Passchendale have been published. The chaplain said Mass, heard confessions, anointed the dying and significantly had some responsibility for the almost impossible task of burying the dead. He was there to give consolation, support and hope to the troops.

When Fr Matt retired, he returned to the diocese of Kilmore

■ Fr Matthew with army officers and their translator in Jerusalem. 9th December 1917 and lived with his sister Dr Susan O'Carroll, who had succeeded her father as the local dispensary doctor in the family home in Dromahair. When Dr Susan retired, she moved to live in Shriff House on the shores of Lough Gill, where she was joined by Fr Matt, Dr Tom and Miss Ita. Fr Matt was a familiar and much loved figure in the area in his later years, often seen at the wheel of his small convertible motor car, still dressed in military style with a black beret and muffler. He went for a swim every day at either Lough Gill or Rosses Point. He died in 1982.

At the time of his Ordination, 10 December 1916, Fr Matt was presented with an illuminated address by his immediate friends and neighbours. They offered heartiest congratulations on his ordination. The address is informative to read:

'We have another reason for felicitating you on this occasion and it is because of your priestly, courageous and manly determination to volunteer your services as Chaplain to the Forces at the Front. We feel admiration for anyone who foregoes the pleasures and comforts of life to engage in a noble cause or to work in the interests of others, but yours is the greatest and noblest of all causes – the salvation of souls. We know that on account of the sacrifices of your family in the great war that the call of duty was less clamant on you than on many others, for we have vividly in mind the part played already by your two heroic brothers, one, who, by his ability, has attained to the eminent rank of Captain in the Veterinary Corps, and the other, though tenderly reared and qualified by his brilliant career as an Intermediate Prize-winner to gain honour in any intellectual walk of life, has elected to take his place as a private soldier, and, although wounded once, volunteering again, and now once more in hospital.

It is a noble record for a family that has long been distinguished for we all have experience of the zeal and ability of your esteemed father, who has come to be recognised as one of the most eminent medical practitioners in Ireland. He has long been noted for his solicitude for others and for his devotion to duty, and we are glad to see that the same characteristics mark the son.

In normal circumstances, we should regret that you are not starting your priestly mission amongst us, but, as it is, we are proud to admire so much determination and self-denial in a fellow townsman. We also regret that we are precluded from offering you a more substantial proof of our appreciation. But when the warring nations are once more at peace we hope to see you return to start life afresh under more peaceful and less trying circumstances. The example of your action in the Great War will be an ideal one for your people to follow, and they will

love and venerate the gallant young priest who braved all for the spiritual welfare of others.'

The address was signed by Thomas Fallon, J P, Chairman Leitrim County Council, John Waters, Ex. Dist. Inspr. RIC, James McGowan, NT, John O'Hara and Francis Crowne, BA.

The illuminated address is very beautifully illustrated with painting of Fr Matt, the house where he was born, the Church where he was baptised, the lake isle of Innisfree, Lough Gill, Parke's Castle and Creevelea Abbey.

About the time that *The Leitrim Guardian* was founded, I was a boy at primary school in Newtownmanor. I had the honour of serving Mass for Fr Matt in Latin in the Church and in his residence at Shriff, on the shores of Lough Gill. We knew that he was a well-travelled man because of all the memorabilia from China, India, the Holy Land and so very many other places all over the world that were around and about him. I particularly remember the large stack of *National Geographics* that were beside his chair. He rarely referred to his travels. Although, I do remember him standing at the bay window in his sitting room looking out over Lough Gill. He told me and another boy who was with me that the scene reminded him of the Sea of Galilee. He advised us to travel the world when we had the opportunity. He said more than a couple of times 'make sure and go to The Holy Land'.

There was never any reference to his distinguished service with the British Army in the local

community. He was never invited into the school to tell us his story. Perhaps he was reluctant to talk about his war experiences because of the hostility in Ireland to those who had served in the British Army. Patrick Kenny in his book *To Raise the Fallen*, a selection of the war letters, prayers and spiritual writing of Fr Willie Doyle SJ, suggests that our ambivalence regarding the involvement of Irishmen in the First World War may be at the root of the silence. Perhaps some of his memories were just too painful to revisit. Perhaps he felt, as Elie Wiesel did after Auschwitz, that silence was the only response to indescribable horror, that it was completely and utterly futile to try to communicate what was incommunicable.

I must say that I enjoyed the research that I did on Fr Matt and his family over the last several months. There is so much more that could be recorded about him and, of course, several of his brothers and sisters merit accounts of their lives to be written. There is much to discover about Dr Harry, Dr Tom, Dr Susan, Fr Jack—who went to China with the Columban Fathers in the 1920s, and James who was a Vet and went to India with the British Army and died there in an accident. I am very grateful to Deirdre, a daughter of Dr Harry's and her husband John Cussen who welcomed me into their home in Newcastlewest and shared with me their knowledge of the O'Carroll family and allowed me to borrow documentation and photographs and other valuable resources.