CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY OF 1899 KILLASNETT CO-OP 1999

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1999 MARKS THE CENTENARY of the foundation of Killasnett Co-operative Society, one of the oldest creamery co-operatives in Ireland. The Society traces its origins to the end of the last century, when Sir Horace Plunkett began a co-operative movement based on local ownership. He set up the first co-operative creamery in Drumcollogher, County Limerick, and by 1893, 30 such creameries had been established.

Plunkett did meet with some resistance and not only from shopkeepers. In Newcastlewest the farmers hunted him from the town saying that they would never send the milk from their Catholic farms to a creamery set up by a Protestant landlord. Evidently Plunkett was not accompanied on that occasion by his friend, Fr. Tom Finlay. The two worked very closely in trying to establish the co-operative creameries, what some called "a revolution with butter". They complimented one another in that they represented the two main religious traditions in the country and Fr. Finlay was an excellent public speaker whilst Plunkett, though educated at Eton and Oxford, was regarded as a poor orator on any platform where he "lisped and stammered".

It is easy to understand why Plunkett went to the south of Ireland in order to initiate his project. He knew that there was plenty of milk produced in Munster and that butter had been exported from Cork one thousand years earlier.

Why the building of co-operative creameries became a reality in North Sligo and Leitrim from 1895 onwards is hard to explain given that milk production was small and seasonal. Strangely it was another Protestant landlord–Sir Jocelyn Gore-Booth–who embarked on the task, an eminently more difficult one than that undertaken by Plunkett in Munster. Yet surely it is the case that Sir Jocelyn was encouraged by what Plunkett had achieved in Limerick.

Early in 1899 Gore-Booth got involved in setting up Killasnett creamery. He was joined in this effort by Fr. Stephen McTiernan, mirroring the pattern set by Plunkett and Finlay. Although Sir Jocelyn's home–Lissadell–was twenty miles from Killasnett, he attended monthly meeting of the committee until 1904. His dedication is evident from the first minute book of the society which records his attendance at a meeting on 13 February 1902 and at a further meeting on 27 February. Given that he must have travelled on horseback or horse-drawn vehicle in the wintry month of February, he was obviously very interested in the project. He was vice-chairman of Killasnett Co-op or which Fr McTiernan acted as chairman or president. Even though the parish priest had only to travel one mile it is clear from the minute book that he was often late for meetings as it is recorded on several occasions that "Sir Jocelyn now vacated the chair as the Rev President had arrived". This indefatigable priest presided over Killasnett Co-op for the first seven years of its existence. He died in 1906, aged ninety-six years. In spite of his great age he put the Society on a secure foundation.

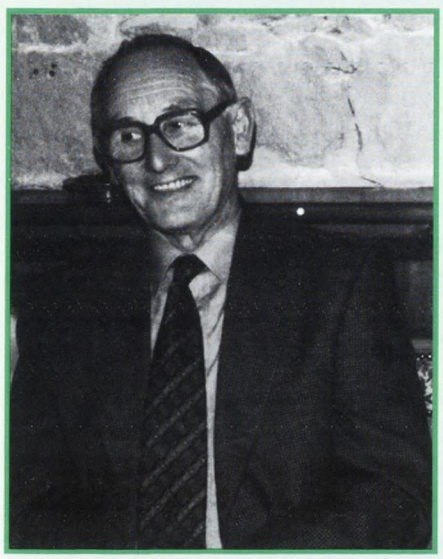
The first creamery was built in Lurganboy, probably because it was at the centre of the best land in the parish. Richard Moore was the first manager of Killasnett Co-Op and several others from the south of Ireland held the position until the appointment of a native of North Leitrim, Owen Murphy, in 1914. He continued with this role until his death in 1960. His long tenure in office–46 years–which covers almost half of the time that the Co-op has been in existence must surely mean that he had the greatest influence on the development of the Society. His most significant challenge came in the early 1930s when he was faced with the task of building a new creamery.

That was the decade when the "Economic War" had ravaged the income of farmers leaving them unable to subscribe to any development. The banks were very careful and wouldn't loan any funds for the building of the new creamery. However, Murphy went on with the work, got a long-term loan from a friend, E C Semple, and opened the new creamery on 15 June 1936. It was regarded as one of the finest creamery premises in Ireland. A lesser man would never have completed such a task.

The new central creamery was erected in Manorhamilton, still in the parish of Killasnett, to facilitate access to the railway and the telephone. The Society also built or acquired five branch creameries.



Left: Staff of Killasnett Creamery in the 1940s. Front Row: Owen Murphy (Manager), Frank Boylan, Benny Gilroy, Tom McDonald, Mae Shanly(nee Parkes), Sarah Clancy (nee Gilligan), John Drumm (who later became Manager). Back Row: Jimmy McMorrow, ?, ?, Joe McMorrow, James O'Hara, Patrick Fox, Michael Healy. Can anyone identify the two men in the back row?
Below: Sean McPartlan, present manager of Killasnett Creamery



When I succeeded as manager in 1960 I was Freplacing a near neighbour as Owen Murphy and I were born and reared on small farms in the townland of Lisnabrack. I retired in 1976. During my tenure the "suckler subsidy" was introduced by the government which meant that farmers were paid not to milk their cows. This led to the decision to close down the five branch creameries.

One shouldn't underestimate what Killasnett Co-op has achieved over the past one hundred years. The terrain of the north-west (particularly County Leitrim) makes the running of any farming co-operative enterprise much more expensive than elsewhere in Ireland. When one studies the statistics this fact is all too obvious: Killasnett Co-op ran six creameries to service 1,400 farmers over 200 square miles whilst at the same time a Co-op in Limerick got more milk from 38 farmers in one creamery covering only 12 square miles.

Just imagine the difference in running costs between Leitrim and Limerick. This reality was never appreciated by the various farming organisations which expected prices as good for farm produce in the north-west as that paid in the south of the country. It is probably true to say that we should have different organisations representing the farmers living on the cold drumlin soil of the north-west and those who farm on the free-draining porous land which constitutes the greater part of our country.

In the early 1960s Killasnett Co-Op obtained a compounder's licence and began provender milling. Our aim was to make a ration for cattle in keeping with the local climate. We enlisted the assistance of agricultural graduates who had an intimate knowledge of conditions on the farms of North Leitrim. Eamon Prendergast, John Doyle and Edward Hallahan helped us formulate–by the inclusion of certain vitamins–a food for cows that made up for the lack of sunshine and other problems from which they suffer as a result of the long winter and early spring which they must spend in byres.

In North Leitrim it is common to have cows indoors for seven months from October to May while in Cork they are housed for only the three winter months. When we went into the milling business, we found it necessary to buy and transport over long distances most of the relevant ingredients as none of the cereals we needed were now indigenous to Leitrim, though in the past when labour was cheap, men working with loys and spades produced fine oat crops.

Today Killasnett Co-op is thriving. The days of struggling and doubt about the future are gone. Sean McPartland, another native of North Leitrim and a graduate of University College, Cork, is now the chief executive. Under his direction, the Co-op looks to the beginning of its second hundred years with confidence whilst taking pride in the achievements of the past century.

With Patrick O'Hara as Chairman and James Durneen, Vice-Chairman–the Committee of Management at present is remarkably unchanged in structure from that at the foundation of Killasnett Creamery.