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Editor of *The Leitrim Observer*

# A Changing County

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### Leitrim Observer

With the changing times facing our county the *Leitrim Observer* is also facing some changing and indeed some challenging times. Our county is taking on a new look each and every week and in line with this we in the *Leitrim Observer* are also taking on new and different aspects. Gone are the days when the paper was simply bought because it was the traditional or habitual thing to do. Instead it is the aim and intention of the Observer to provide hard news, to be on the cutting edge of events, while also maintaining the vital element of being a community newspaper.

Every Wednesday morning the *Leitrim Observer* appears on the shelf of our newsagents and supermarkets. Over the last 100 years the face of this paper has undergone many changes but still retains one trait that we all associate with i.e the masthead of the paper. It's traditional Old Celtic lettering is something we have all become familiar with down through the years. The *Leitrim Observer* is celebrating its 111th birthday this year. It was originally founded by the Mulvey family from Ballinaglera in 1889 and was bought by Pat Dunne, for a rumoured sum of £150 in 1904. The Dunne family are still very much involved in the paper with 'Old' Pat Dunne's grand-nephew and of the same name, still retaining the position of the paper's managing director.

The paper has experienced a very varied and coloured history. The Black and Tans made the paper their first stop when they came to Carrick-on-Shannon during the War of Inde-



Back: Donal O'Grady, John Connolly & Paul Brennan. Front: Editor of the *Leitrim Observer* – Claire Casserly.

pendence and badly burned the premises, destroying a lot of the early files of the paper.

Not many people know that at one point the paper was printed on a Thursday and it was only when the war started in 1939 that it had the effect of bringing the paper's publishing day back a day to a Wednesday, in order to meet the Dublin train which was reduced to running on a once weekly basis.

Down through the years we have seen the paper move from hot metal printing to the use of linotype machines and now to being fully computerised. Indeed the *Leitrim Observer* is one of the few provincial papers that can boast of full computerisation with everything from the newsroom to ads to photos processed through state of the art technology. This modern advancement has also resulted in full page make-up on computers with the pages then sent via an ISDN line down to the printers.

For us in the newsroom this has resulted in a far superior working

environment. Through the use of the internet and e-mail we are now able to access information faster than ever before.

It must also be said that in September 1998 Scottish Radio Holdings took over the *Leitrim Observer*. This was also a development in line with what was happening all over the country, with large media groups acquiring provincial newspapers with the result that there are in fact very few family run provincials in existence today.

The ironic part of working for a newspaper such as the *Leitrim Observer* is that everyone knows your name but few know the face. Each week our readers pick up the paper and names such as Dónal O'Grady, John Connolly and Paul Brennan appear throughout. But who are these people?

Dónal O'Grady is the deputy editor of the paper and hails from Thurles in Co Tipperary. He has worked with the Observer for four years and covers all aspects of news and sports. He is

definitely a man for all stories. Paul Brennan started with the *Observer* last September and since then his name has also become synonymous with front page stories and colourful features. He also covers all aspects of news and hails from just down the road, Five-Mile-House, in Co Roscommon.

One of the stalwarts of the *Observer* has been John Connolly, the sports editor. John kicked off his career in the *Observer* in January 1990. Hailing from Finglas in Dublin he has covered all the major Leitrim matches, enjoyed the glory days of 1994 and since then has experienced the joys and the sorrows of Leitrim footballers and their fans. One does wonder at this stage if there is any possibility of John changing his allegiance from navy and blue to the green and gold, but with his strong Dublin accent still very evident this does not appear likely.

As for myself, I travelled from my native Navan from the the *Meath Chronicle* to the *Leitrim Observer* in late 1989. At that time it was probably my intention to stay for a few short years and head further afield. This was a common practice among young reporters throughout the country at that time. However, Leitrim has enticing qualities and gradually over the years I headed up the ranks from junior to senior reporter to deputy editor and then took on the massive task of filling in the departing editor, Anthony Hickey's shoes. We all have dreams and ideas of how we would like our newsroom to function, what we can change in the paper and what we can improve on. There is always room for improvement, but some things take time and gradually we have made some changes but more are still to come. My overall ambition for the *Observer* is to make it the best paper we can. We want to be on the cutting edge of hard news, bringing clear accurate

reporting to all our readers in all parts of the county.

However, when making any changes the one main mainstay is that the *Observer* is a community newspaper. Our local correspondents are an invaluable part of the system. They not only offer local information on a weekly basis but also provide quite entertaining insights into what is happening around the county. Sean O'Callaghan in Corraleehan, writes with an acerbic wit giving us an insight in to the PUF (Poor Unfortunate Farmers), Charles Reilly in Arva writes of lots of interesting little facts (better than any encyclopedia), Cormac McGill in Dromod also stirs up a little bit of debate while P J Leddy in Manorhamilton provides extensive coverage of life in the northern half of the county.

These people cannot be thanked enough for their dedication and commitment, not only to us in the *Observer*, but also to the readers themselves. These are the people who work behind the scenes. However one man who has become the face of the *Observer* is Willie Donnellan who acts as photographer and advertising manager, has gone beyond the call of duty for this paper. He is on hand night and day for the people of Leitrim, travelling the four corners to take that all essential picture. Willie has gone many miles in the dead of night to sit in some community centre, into the wee hours, to take a picture. He works all day, all night and most weekends in his commitment, not just to the paper, but also to all those around him. His dedication knows no bounds and at times we wonder do people actually realise how committed he is in providing this service. Even as I pen this piece he is meant to be on holidays but so far has gone to five or six places to take pictures that people have requested. Any of us who have worked in other papers know that

without a doubt this is not the norm. Many may say this is his job but in fact, it is my belief it is far, far more for Mr. Donnellan.

As a newsroom team we are all conscious that at times the job brings great joy and great hardship. You can get a great buzz out of covering a story with a happy ending. However, there are times when the job is tough - having to ring up someone at a time of great grief or sorrow in order to get those essential details. We also realise that court cases can bring hardship on a family, but unfortunately when one takes a decision to print all cases that is a rule that at all times must be followed. This decision is not undertaken lightly, but in fairness to all members of the public, it is one we strictly adhere to. However, all in the *Observer* newsroom are aware, no matter what the story, this is the life we decided to pursue and as in every career, there are the ups and downs. As in any business time brings changes and in the last year since I took on the mantle of editor we have seen those changes. As stated it is hoped more are to come. When asked about the years to come I think that overall I would like to see a greater reader involvement in the paper - we want to know what the readers would like to see in their weekly newspaper. Greater emphasis will also be focussed on the northern half of the county in a bid to cut down on what many see as a great divide.

We hope our readers realise that behind those by-lines they see every week attached to a story, there is a dedicated team of reporters, photographers and many more people working in the *Leitrim Observer* to try and bring to them the best paper they can.

It is my ambition that tradition will not be the reason why we buy the *Observer*, but that the contents are the overriding attraction.