



Breandán Ó hEarcáin: Buaic na hArdréime

Brendan Harkin: The Summit of Greatness

To many GAA outsiders, Brendan Harkin was “Mr Killyclogher”. In fact, he grew up in the Reaghan and Lislap townlands in the Knockmoyle end of our Parish of Cappagh. Reaghan is derived from Irish *Riachán*, meaning “a small grey spot of land”. Brendan was proud of where he came from and remarked “The people of Reaghan, my people, were warm, cheerful and friendly and so Reaghan itself was bright, not grey.”

Brendan was born in 1948 to Joe, a forestry worker in Lislap forest, and Jennie. He had three brothers: Desmond, Pat and Seamus; and a sister, Gloria. He attended the local Castleroddy Primary School before moving on to Omagh CBS and later, Queen’s University Belfast.

Brendan’s earliest GAA memory was from around the age of 4 when he heard his brother talk about an All-Ireland Football Final between Meath and Cavan. He remembered the 1953 All-Ireland Final because Armagh were taking part. He often reminisced about listening to matches as a child on the “wireless” in Nugent’s house in Castleroddy. He referred to it as “the place of worship where we listened to the Gospel according to Michael O’Hehir.”

Brendan’s father and his uncle, George, were on a 1930s hurling team that represented the Parish and he often recalled how in his formative years, all these men were considered local heroes. So, in such a house and community steeped in the GAA, it was no surprise that Brendan lived and breathed the Association.

When he was born, there was a hurling club, as well as a bit of football, in the Knockmoyle area of our Parish until the mid-1950s. After that, the GAA was largely dormant in Cappagh until the mid-1960s.

In 1965, our current Club was re-formed with Brendan and others, including Red Mick McCrory and Joe O’Connor, taking the lead. Brendan undertook the position of club secretary at that time, at only 16 years of age, a position he held until 2018, thereby serving for an incredible 54 years in this role. He continued then as assistant secretary up until his death, a manifestation of total unbroken, unwavering and loyal service to our Club, the likes of which has never and will probably never be seen again. It seems unbelievable now that the elders of a community would place a sixteen-year-old boy in such a position of leadership. Clearly, his qualities, skills and potential were evident from an early age.

Our Club began to grow and Brendan took great delight in the reintroduction of hurling to the Parish in the 1970s – a rarity then in West Tyrone.

Regarding Brendan’s own playing career, the highlights included playing in the Tyrone Junior Final, winning Junior league and championship medals, as well as an Intermediate league medal and a county hurling championship medal. Whilst at Queen’s University, Brendan was an All-Ireland Fresher finalist in a match that featured Queen’s against UCD in Croke Park. All in all, he played senior football for about 20 years for the club and “a bit of hurling.” He would also take great pride in Scór accomplishments, reaching Ulster finals in Novelty Acts and Tráth na gCeist.

Shortly after becoming club secretary at 16, Brendan became the West Tyrone Board and Tyrone GAA delegate for the Club. He often said he was learning more at West Tyrone Board meetings than he then was at Queen's! At the same time, and unbeknownst to his mother, who was more concerned about his studies, Brendan was regularly taking a bus back from Belfast to Killyclogher to play club matches and returning secretly to Belfast.

Brendan's achievements in GAA administration went on to be unrivalled and unparalleled in terms of length, breadth and quality of service. At county level, he was club delegate, Assistant Secretary of the League Board, Chairman of the Youth Board, Chairman of the Hurling Board, County Annual Editor, PRO, County Secretary, County Chairman (2 terms) and ultimately Honorary County President. He was the Tyrone delegate on Comhairle Uladh at Provincial level. At National level, he was both the Tyrone and the Ulster delegate on Ard-Chomhairle.

Only two people have ever served as Tyrone Chairperson for two terms. What is more remarkable, perhaps, is that Brendan was very young when he first took this position. His first term coincided with a period of great political strife that was dominated by the Hunger Strikes; his second term occurred during a period of internal County strife. His masterful stewardship guided the Association in Tyrone through dangerous, tough, and testing times where his calming influence was vitally important.

A prominent national GAA administrator told the writer that Brendan was a "shoo-in" for becoming Tyrone's first GAA President – his only limitation being his modesty. Perhaps he declined to run for such a lofty position at the time as it could have taken him too far away from his beloved Club.

It is undeniable that throughout Brendan's time as a county, provincial and national GAA administrator, he actively and passionately maintained his involvement in all aspects of our Club as player, administrator, manager, Irish teacher, fundraiser, and Scór coach amongst many other roles. His presence on the side-line was a constant. While teams came and went, Brendan was always there. Loved by young and old equally.

When Tyrone were struggling to find a manager for the County senior hurling team, Brendan took the job upon himself. How did he do? He won the Ulster Junior Hurling Championship in 1995 and 1996, the All-Ireland Junior Hurling Championship in 1996, and the National Hurling League Division 4 title, thereby taking our County senior hurlers to Division 2 of the NHL – its highest ever position. Brendan managed various football, hurling and Scór teams at club, school and county levels. Not only did he manage them, but he won titles with them!

His administrative skills, first honed in West Tyrone meetings, were a joy to watch in club meetings, County Board meetings or National Congresses. His skills in mediating, negotiating, cajoling, and manoeuvring his way around entrenched positions were watched in awe by the writer many times. Heated meetings in places like "Barney the Devil's", Ballinamullan, Garvaghey, etc were normally settled by his wise and calming words in ways that took the heat out of any argument. He was patient enough to allow everyone to have their say – even if it was often non-sensical bluster – but everyone knew that his words settled the debate.

Brendan was a firm believer in the democracy and social equality that is at the heart of the GAA, two things that were being denied to Nationalists in the North when our club was re-formed. He was the proudest Irish man that one could ever encounter – firm and unequivocal on the national question and an active civil rights campaigner at both Queen's and in Omagh.

After finishing Queen's University with his history degree, Brendan immediately took up a teaching position in his old school, Omagh CBS where he stayed throughout his entire teaching career. He taught

history, politics, Latin, Irish and PE. Huge numbers of lucky pupils were moulded by his knowledge, talents, beliefs and care. He was also a strong Trade Union-man and stalwartly protected the rights of other teachers. All the while, Brendan was managing Omagh CBS football teams.

Brendan's achievements were not confined to the GAA. He was a strong community-man and pursued any activity to make this a better place for us all to live. He organised carnivals, sports, concerts and shows to bring the community together as well as amusing the patrons; his stage double-act of "Johnny and Barney" with his great friend John Hutchinson brings an immediate smile and lives long in the memory. Brendan organised Irish language classes and was prominent in helping Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann establish a home in Ulster.

As a local historian, it would be true to say that Brendan loved the old ways – country people and country ways of life. He was Editor of *The Cappagh Annual* – a wonderful series of publications which are must-reads for anyone from the Parish. He was also a writer in local history publications like *Reflections on Cappagh: Within the Sound of The Bell*, another wonderful narrative of our local history. In 1980, Brendan wrote *Years to Remember: An Outline of the Development of the GAA in the Parish of Cappagh* – still the only written history of the GAA in our Parish.

Reflecting on the historical Cappagh Bell, Brendan once wrote:

We may well ask for whom the bell tolls but the reality is that it is tolling for us all. As members of human-kind we are lessened by every death. When it is a death from within a small, closely-knit area then this philosophy becomes painfully very real.

I Láthair na Mórgachta: In the Presence of Greatness

Brendan's death has dealt our Club a severe and deep-felt blow. We are much the poorer for losing him, but we are much the richer for having had him in our lives. The *seanfocal* (proverb) declares prophetically: ***Maireann an chraobh ar an fhál ach ní mhaireann an lámh do chuir***: 'Although the hand that planted the seed is no longer with us, his seed lives on after him through the branches that grew from that seed.' From the early beginnings to the "New Park" in Ballinamullan to the large and flourishing club we now have, Brendan has gifted us an immense and ever-lasting legacy. It should be our mission, our duty and our tribute to him to build on this.

Whilst we mourn the great loss of Brendan, this pales in comparison to the loss felt by his beloved family. To Brendan's wife Clare, children Gráinne, Kerry, Sinéad and Kevin, grandchildren and wider family members, we offer you our whole-hearted condolences and support at this devastating time. ***Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam uasal.***

I measc Naomh na hÉireann agus Laochra na nGael go raibh sé: May he be among the Saints of Ireland and the Heroes of the Gaeil.

Niall McKenna

