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THE CURIOUS CAREER OF SUB-INSPECTOR THOMAS ST. GEORGE McCARTHY

*By Marcus de Búrca **

The most widely accepted version of the meeting held in Hayes's Hotel, Thurles on November 1, 1884, at which what later came to be called the Gaelic Athletic Association was founded gives the number present as seven. They were: Michael Cusack and Maurice Davin (who had jointly called the meeting), John Wyse Power, John McKay, Joseph K. Bracken, Joseph O'Ryan and Thomas St. George McCarthy.

Of the seven founder-members, three — Davin, Bracken and O'Ryan — have always been known to have been natives of Co. Tipperary, coming from Carrick-on-Suir, Templemore and Carrick-on-Suir, respectively. Of the remaining four, Cusack (then resident in Dublin) was from Clare, Wyse Power (then resident in Kildare) was from Waterford, and McKay (then resident in Cork) was from Belfast.

For a century after the 1884 meeting, however, something of a mystery surrounded the origin of the remaining G.A.A. founder McCarthy, who in 1884 was an officer of the Royal Irish Constabulary stationed in Templemore. Occasional references to him implied that he was a Kerryman, but the mystery deepened when in 1984 the centenary year of the G.A.A. passed without any claim to McCarthy's hitherto assumed Kerry origin by or on behalf of the Association in that county.

The return to the Public Record Office in Dublin in recent years of certain R.I.C. files now enables one to prove conclusively that, like Davin, Bracken and O'Ryan, Thomas St. George McCarthy was also from Tipperary. According to his personal record, when he joined the police force as a cadet on November 21, 1882, McCarthy was aged 20 years and five months. His file states that he was a native of county Tipperary, and that on November 18, 1887, he married a native of Dublin.

Before he joined the R.I.C. McCarthy had been a prominent rugby player in Dublin. Contemporary records relating to the Trinity College rugby club, of which he was a member in 1881, indicate that he had been educated at Tipperary Grammar School, the Erasmus Smith foundation situated in Tipperary town. In January 1882 McCarthy played for Ireland against Wales, and later that year won a Leinster Senior Cup medal with Dublin University Rugby Club. He was the first of nine former Tipperary Grammar School pupils to win rugby "caps" for Ireland between 1882 and the closure of the School in 1923¹.

In the hope — rather than on the expectation — that because McCarthy was educated in Tipperary town his family resided somewhere in that area, this writer searched the Catholic parish registers for that town, without success, for a record of McCarthy's baptism. However, when this search was gradually extended to all the adjoining parishes, the result justified the labour involved. McCarthy's Tipperary origin was proved beyond doubt, enabling the county to claim four of the seven founders of the G.A.A.

The baptismal register of Bansha Catholic Church (some five miles from Tipperary town) shows that on June 11, 1862, Thomas St. George McCarthy, the newly-born son of George McCarthy and Margaret Doherty, was baptised. The child's sponsors were Thomas McCarthy and Clara Doherty, probably his uncle and aunt. Moreover, since young

* *Revised version of talk delivered at Mullinahone, August 1987 (Kickham Week-end).*



McCarthy's father was a policeman, his personal file has also survived intact. For all one knows, McCarthy senior may have been the inspiration of the famous satire "The Bansa Peeler" by the local poet Darby Ryan.

Since Thomas St. George McCarthy began to take part in athletics as well as in rugby on his arrival in Dublin around 1879, it is not unreasonable to assume that he had taken part in sports meetings while at school. Contemporary Tipperary newspapers show that boys from the Grammar School often competed at local meetings. Since the Grammar School also had a rugby team, it was clearly there that his rugby career began. Later while living in Dundalk he played cricket for a local Catholic team — another game he was probably introduced to at school in Tipperary Grammar School.

In Dublin McCarthy came to know Michael Cusack, who since 1877 was running a cramming school — Cusack's Academy — which prepared young men for entry examinations for Trinity College, the medical and law schools, the army, police and the navy. In 1879 McCarthy played for Cusack's Academy rugby team, and it was Cusack who coached him for his R.I.C. cadetship examination in 1882, in which McCarthy took first place.

This friendship between Cusack and McCarthy presumably explains McCarthy's presence in Hayes's Hotel in 1884. Since Cusack is known to have scattered invitations far and wide, he may have sent one to McCarthy in view of his proximity to Thurles. It is, however, worth noting that oral tradition in Thurles asserts that McCarthy's presence in the hotel was the result of a chance meeting in the street outside with Cusack or Davin, the latter of whom he would have met at sports meetings in Dublin.²

1. The other eight were: H.M. Brabazon (1883), R.S. Frank (1884), F.J. Green (1888), R. Callinan (1900), F.R. George (1905), G.M. Kidd (1908), H.R. Price (1913) and A.H. Pike (1924).
2. See also Sunday Independent, 22-12-1973.

Not surprisingly, in view of the strong nationalist bias of the Association from its foundation, Thomas St. George McCarthy never again took any part in the G.A.A. His subsequent career justifies one in commenting that his absence may not have been a loss to the G.A.A. In March 1885, after less than two years in Templemore, he was transferred to Derrygonnelly in Fermanagh. Here he remained for less than three years, moving in November 1887 to Limavady in Derry.

After seven years in Limavady McCarthy came south to Dundalk, where he remained nine years before moving in 1903 to Robertstown in Kildare. In April 1905, only one and a half years later, he moved to New Pallas in Limerick, close to the Tipperary border. Four years later in July 1909 he was again on the move, this time to Newport in Mayo. There he stayed for over two years until in September 1911 came what was to prove his last transfer — to Ballymahon in Longford, where he retired in 1912.

Two obvious, if not indeed striking, facts emerge from McCarthy's career in the R.I.C. First, he retired five months before his 50th birthday, even though 50 was then the earliest age one could normally leave that force at. Yet he must have been in good general health since he lived another 31 years, making him by far the longest-lived of the seven G.A.A. founders, surviving even Davin (who died in 1927) by 16 years.

Secondly, there is something distinctly odd about the succession (if that be the right word) of posts in the R.I.C. held by McCarthy. If one excludes his first move — from the prosperous town of Templemore to the tiny village of Derrygonnelly — his transfers in his first twenty years or so look like normal promotions, judged by the size of the towns he served in. This view



is supported by his file, which records his promotion in January 1883 to Sub-Inspector Third Class, then in March 1887 to Second Class and in August 1896 to First Class.

Then suddenly, after nine years in his biggest station so far, in the town of Dundalk with a population at the time of 12,000 (four times that of Templemore or Limavady), McCarthy's career appears to have taken a nosedive. Robertstown in 1903 had fewer than 500 inhabitants, New Pallas and Newport fewer still, and even Ballymahon in 1911 only 660 souls.

McCarthy's personal file provides at least a partial explanation. The overall impression is of a man who was never a model policeman. His transfer to Tipperary to Fermanagh came at his own expense (and presumably at his own request) after he had been found to have tampered with an official document in Templemore in 1885. In April 1891 while in Limavady he received unfavourable comment for "serious and continued neglect of duty", the nature of which is not recorded.

An undated note on his file, made apparently after his arrival in Dundalk records a severe reprimand for disobedience to orders, together with a warning about his future should he "again refuse to carry out his duties loyally or give cause for complaint to the Inspector General". Finally, another undated comment, presumably made around the time of his retirement, states that he was placed on pension because he had become unfit for further duty because of his general conduct or demeanour — the file is partly illegible here — and because of injuries he had received while on duty in May 1894, during his time in Dundalk.

A search of Dublin marriage registers by this writer revealed that McCarthy's marriage in November 1887 to a Dublin woman took place in the Pro-Cathedral. His bride was Mary Lucy Lynch, the daughter of a Galway man then practising as a solicitor in Great Charles Street, off North Circular Road and close to the O'Connell Schools. So far as this writer's enquiries over a period of many years go, there were two children of this marriage, a son who eventually practised law in Edmonton, Canada, and a daughter Kathleen, who on her marriage settled in Melbourne, Australia, after a period as an actress in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

For many years before his death McCarthy lived in Oakley Road in the Dublin suburb of Ranelagh, where he was a regular customer of a local public-house. To the end of his life he retained an interest in rugby and hurling. He attended international rugby games at Lansdowne Road and All Ireland hurling finals in Croke Park. Around 1941 his health began deteriorate, and on March 12, 1943, he died of heart disease in Linden Convalescent Home, Blackrock. He is buried in nearby Dean's Grange Cemetery.

In view of the marked contrast between McCarthy's career and that of his father, a glance at George McCarthy's file may be of interest. George Thomas McCarthy was born in 1831 in Kerry (hence, presumably, the mistaken belief that his son was also from Kerry) and was twenty five and a half when he entered the R.I.C. in 1857. Before that he had been for two years in the Revenue Police, and it was probably while stationed (with the rank of Lieutenant) in Rathmullen in Donegal that he met and married Margaret Doherty.

Since, like his son later, George McCarthy entered the police force as a cadet, he probably came from a well-to-do home. His first posting in 1858 was to Bansha, where he spent 10 years, being then transferred twenty miles north to Ballynonty near Thurles. In September, 1865 while on duty at Cashel races, his action in quelling a mini-riot by race-goers patronising a mobile shebeen earned him a special reward of £15, perhaps £200 by 1988 values. In 1867 while in Bansha he got special pay for good service of an unspecified nature.

Then in April 1870 George McCarthy was appointed a Resident Magistrate when only 39 years of age. For the next 15 to 20 years his name appears in national directories as one of four R.M.s for county Tipperary. Since he sent his son to the local grammar school, it is likely that he resided in or near Tipperary town.



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