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# *J.K. Bracken Centenary: a reflection*

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by Marcus de Búrca

When in May 1894 Joseph Kevin Bracken lost the contest for chairman of the re-formed Tipperary GAA County Board by a single vote, he severed his connections with the Association, which had begun at the foundation meeting in Hayes's Hotel, Thurles in November 1884. Surprisingly, he was the last of the seven accepted founders to sever connections with the GAA. Cusack had been dismissed in 1886; Davin had resigned (for the second time) in 1889; the RIC officer Thomas St. G. McCarthy (of Bansha) never came to another GAA meeting after 1884; Joseph Ryan of Carrick had emigrated to Canada. Both Wyse Power (first chairman of the Dublin county board) and the Ulster journalist John McKay had also parted company with the Association.

Re-reading Nancy Murphy's seminal article of 1985 on Bracken, it comes initially as a surprise to find 'J K' described as a demagogue, which my dictionary defines as a popular and fractious leader of people. Yet, on reflection, it is likely that Bracken himself would have accepted this description, especially the adjective 'fractious' as relating to a faction. Long before the GAA was founded he was an orthodox Fenian or IRB man, and although he had been involved in athletics (and also probably in the type of football then played in North Tipperary), it was as an IRB activist that he took his seat in Miss Hayes's billiard room in Thurles on 1 November 1884. The same, of course, applies to Wyse Power and probably to several others from the Thurles and Carrick areas, whose names (for reasons of security, as we would put it today) are not recorded.

Bracken's role in the foundation of the GAA brings up once more the question: who really founded the Association? For half a century or more a story has been going the rounds which insists that the non-IRB men at Hayes's Hotel were only fronting the IRB men, and foremost among the latter was Bracken. It is 35 years since the parish priest of Dalkey, the Church historian Fr. John Meagher, told me that his father had always insisted that the Fenians were behind the Thurles meeting. And Meagher senior (who was at Croke Park on Bloody Sunday 1920) should have known, for he was the secretary of the South Tipperary GAA board. Recently, the Fenian theory has received a new airing in a life of Harry Boland's father Jim (chairman of the Dublin county board at his death in 1893), written by his grandson, the late Kevin Boland TD, in private circulation in Dublin. So far from this theory fading out the further away we move from the 1880s, the more convincing it is becoming.

By 1884 J. K. Bracken was in his early 30s, successfully managing the family stonemasonry business founded as far back as 1848 by his father, whose family had been in Templemore for nearly two hundred years. 'JK' never made any secret of his republican beliefs; from the day the GAA was founded he pushed Fenians for membership of important GAA committees, and was himself elected one of the earliest vice-presidents of the Association. He was responsible for the election of the Tipperary Fenian John O'Leary as a GAA patron, and championed Tipperary's role in the development of the GAA. Monuments bearing his name can still be found around the countryside; all are of a type associated with extreme republicanism.

Bracken's only seemingly inconsistent action in the GAA was his support of the seceders who walked out of the acrimonious 1887 Congress, when the IRB ousted Davin and took over the

Association. Yet, curiously, when the split was healed he was not among the executive officers, nor was he on the Tipperary board for 1888 or 1889. But he remained a Fenian activist way into the 1890s.

As a controversial local politician in Templemore, 'J K' had another public career, heading the poll in the 1898 local elections, thus gaining democratic approval of his physical force outlook. However, this complex period of his life is not the concern of a GAA historian.

Understandably, 'J K' has been overshadowed by his famous son Brendan, who was elevated to a Viscounty by Churchill, when a member of Britain's World War II coalition Cabinet. For those interested in the old rural custom of 'tracing', 'J K' was twice married. His first wife, Mary Agnes Matthews of Limerick, bore him two daughters, Cora Dunlop and Eileen Barrington, making retired Judge Donal Barrington of the European Court of Justice a grandson. His second wife, Hanna Ryan of Borrisoleigh, of the widely scattered Frewen clan of Aherlow, bore him four more children: Peter, an officer of the young Garda force; Nancy, who married Frank O'Donnell; Brendan, the British politician; and Kevin, a member of the Jesuit Society in Australia.

J.K. Bracken died on 2 May 1904 at his home near Killmallock, whither he had moved in 1902. He is buried in nearby Tankardstown cemetery.

### **Acknowledgements**

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