

McDyer, James Daniel

by Shaun Boylan

McDyer, James Daniel (1911–87), parish priest and founder of the Glencolumbkille Co-operative Society, was born 14 September 1911 near Glenties, Co. Donegal, youngest son among five sons and two daughters of John McDyer, farmer, and Brigid McDyer (née Harkin). He was educated at the local national school and St Eunan's College, Letterkenny (1925–30), before attending St Patrick's College, Maynooth, to study for the priesthood. After ordination he was sent to Wandsworth, London, as curate (1937–41). In 1941 he was transferred to Orpington, Kent, where he helped to raise funds for the rebuilding of the local church destroyed by an air raid. After a further six years in England, during which time he also served in Brighton, he returned to his diocese as curate of Tory Island off the coast of Co. Donegal. Here he came to believe that the mass emigration of young people from communities such as Tory was due to a lack of local industry, but came up against government bureaucracy when he was refused a grant to found a knitting industry.

Returning in December 1951 to the mainland as curate of Glencolumbkille, Co. Donegal, he found a community that, like Tory Island, was gradually dying. As chairman of the parish council he identified 'the five curses of Glencolumbkille' as a lack of good roads, lack of electricity, lack of employment, lack of water, and lack of social activity. His first initiative was to build (1953) a community centre as the focus for the effort to regenerate the village. The following year (1954) saw much of his work come to fruition. He raised funds to purchase land for a community park and wrote to the then taoiseach, Eamon de Valera (qv) about the 'twenty-two curses of Glencolumbkille'. He succeeded in having electricity installed in the village and the phased road improvement scheme (1954–60) started. He also convinced Gaeltarra Éireann to base a new factory in the village to manufacture Donegal tweed. The factory operated until 1973 and provided a vital morale boost to the local people during the early years of his campaign. In 1956 the first piped water scheme was introduced.

His strategy for preventing emigration and preserving the community was the creation of agricultural and industrial co-operatives entirely owned by local people. He believed that the community could only survive if it became self-sufficient and independent of both government and private industry. However, successive attempts (1954–63) to create an agricultural co-operative, including one that encompassed more than 14,000 acres of mountain and 130 small farms, consistently failed due to bureaucratic reluctance and to the unjustified association of co-operative agriculture with the Soviet model. McDyer often quipped that he was a communist but one who favoured the Irish word *meitheal*, which reflected the Christian concept of helping one's neighbour.

His co-operative schemes for local industry were more successful. In 1961 his approach to Gen. M. J. Costello (qv), chairman of the Irish Sugar Company, led to the establishment of Glencolumbkille Co-operative's vegetable-processing factory in 1962. The following year (1963) he toured the USA for sixteen days, raising £18,000 in capital for the venture. As interest in the Glencolumbkille experiment spread, he toured the Western counties during 1962–5, giving lectures on self-sufficiency for small communities. In 1964 the Glencolumbkille hand-knitting co-operative was founded and a machine-knitting co-operative followed soon after (1966).

In 1967 he turned his energies towards developing tourism, establishing the West Donegal Folk Village, portraying 300 years of life and culture in Donegal. A holiday village followed in 1968. In 1970 he founded the Glencolumbkille Development Association to ensure that all local development benefited the entire community. The Association purchased the Glenbay Hotel in 1971, the year he was appointed parish priest of Carrick, Co. Donegal. At the same time he also campaigned against Irish entry into the EEC, believing that it would destroy communities like Glencolumbkille.

By 1973 the vegetable processing co-operative had switched to processing fish and the Glenbay Hotel had been extended. When Erin Foods purchased (1975) a share of the equity of the fish processing plant, it became Earagáil Eisc Teo. The hotel was modernised in 1978 but by this time McDyer and the Development Association saw that the management of the hotel needed to be reorganised. With Gaeltarra Éireann purchasing 10 per cent of the equity, a new company called the Glenbay Hotel Company Ltd was formed (1979). When McDyer was offered 15 per cent of the equity, to be transferred to him on his retirement, he refused on the grounds that the Development Association was founded for the benefit of the entire community. Despite the new partnership, disaster struck the Development Association in November 1980 when it was revealed that costs had spiralled out of control to create massive losses for the hotel. However, the creditors were understanding and, rather than face liquidation, the Development Association was allowed to sell its fixed assets voluntarily. The other co-operatives remained unaffected. After retiring as parish priest, McDyer lived at Carrick, Co. Donegal. He died 25 November 1987 at home.

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*ITWW*; *Ir. Times*, 10 Jan. 1976; James Daniel McDyer, *Fr McDyer of Glencolumbkille: an autobiography* (1982); *Ir. Independent*, *Ir. Press*, 26 Nov. 1987; *Ir. Times*, 26, 30 Nov. 1987