

Murphy, Con (Cornelius)

by Terry Clavin

Murphy, Con (Cornelius) (1922–2007), hurler and GAA administrator, was born on 28 October 1922 in Toureen, near Innishannon, Co. Cork, the eldest of seven children of Dan Murphy, labourer, of Toureen, and his wife Julia (née McCarthy). Many of his uncles were active in the IRA during the 1919–23 period and in the GAA, particularly Seán MacCarthy (qv), who served as lord mayor of Cork, Fianna Fáil TD and president of the GAA. Their nationalism informed his lifelong involvement with the GAA and support for the Irish language movement.

He attended Innishannon national school and from 1936 North Monastery secondary school, a famed hurling academy in Cork city, necessitating a thirty-mile round trip by bicycle. He played Gaelic football and hurling, lining out in both codes for his local Valley Rovers club from 1938. His adolescence yielded a stream of hurling honours: three Harty Cup medals with North 'Mon' (1940–42), captain for the last two; three all-Ireland colleges titles with Munster (1940–42), captain in 1942; and a minor all-Ireland title with Cork in 1941.

First selected for the Cork senior hurling team in late 1941, he emerged as a championship regular in 1942 and participated in the last three of Cork's historic four-in-a-row all-Irelands of 1941–4. Starting as a corner-back, later he moved into the half-back line before settling into his favoured full-back slot from 1946. With Cork, he won four all-Ireland medals (1942–4, 1946), five Munster titles (1942–4, 1946–7) and a National Hurling League championship (1948). He also won three Railway Cups with Munster (1948–50).

Murphy was an unsung, but worthy, member of a storied Cork team that included Christy Ring (qv) and Jack Lynch (qv). Big, muscular and implacably tough, he relished the manner in which hurling was then played with what he called a spirit of legitimate abandon. His game was based on checking the hard-charging forwards of that era, but he was also a fluent ground hurler and regularly rescued his goalkeeper with spectacular goal-line interventions.

Spurning offers from senior hurling clubs in Cork city, he stayed with Valley Rovers, a junior club, winning south-eastern Cork divisional championships in hurling (1941 and 1949) and football (1943, 1947 and 1951). At senior hurling level, he played for the Carrigdhoun divisional team, distinguishing himself in a memorable Cork final lost to Glen Rovers in 1945; the lack of a county medal was the great regret of his career. He retired from inter-county hurling in 1952 and from club hurling and football in 1956.

In the mid 1940s he began refereeing hurling matches, quickly becoming renowned in this role. He officiated at the all-Ireland finals of 1948 and 1950, the National League finals of 1947 and 1952, the all-Ireland junior final of 1949, seven senior club finals in Cork, and several Tipperary senior club finals. His dismissal of two players in the first five minutes of the 1947 National League final made a big impression, and thereafter teams exercised restraint in his stern presence. He could be officious and Limerick supporters never forgave him for costing their team the 1949 Munster final by disallowing a goal over an inconsequential infringement. Nonetheless, spectators appreciated that his refereeing guaranteed a clean contest.

His administrative career within the GAA began aged 16 when he acted as the Valley Rovers delegate at the Carrigdhoun convention. First elected to the Cork county executive in 1947, he served as president of the south-eastern board (1948–56), and as county vice-chairman (1951–4), treasurer (1954–6), secretary (1956–72) and honorary secretary (1973–6). For over fifty years from 1950, he was usually a member of the Munster council and of the GAA central council. Leading the well-organised and influential Cork delegation at the GAA annual congress, he regularly swayed congress with his lucid and forensic interventions.

In 1942 he joined the Cork local health authority as a clerical officer, and advanced steadily, in 1973 becoming a senior officer in the psychiatric services section in the Southern Health Board (one of several Southern Health Board executives prominent within Cork's GAA officialdom). In 1950 he married Theresa Barry-Murphy of a famous Farnanes hurling family. They had two sons and two daughters, and lived at Bishopstown, a Cork suburb.

As county secretary, the county board's administrative chief, he developed a reputation as one of the most industrious, capable and knowledgeable officials in the GAA. Under his aegis, a fundraising body, Ciste na Banban, was set up by the Cork board in 1962 to apply the football pools concept to Gaelic games. The venture was a success and was adopted in the rest of Ireland. In 1967 Ciste na Banban established a hurley factory at Kilbarry. Murphy was closely involved in the factory's management, which supplied about 90,000 hurleys annually during its 1970s production peak; it closed in 1997.

Stressing discipline and respect for match officials, Murphy was scathing of club officials who covered up or defended misbehaviour. As president of the south-eastern board, he showed no mercy towards Valley Rovers teammates when they came before him for disciplinary sanction, once banning his brother for six months. Unmoved by accusations of dictatorial behaviour, he never shirked unpopular decisions, and in 1968 was subjected to bitter invective for his decisive role in the expulsion of a Glen Rovers hurler from the GAA for braining an opponent.

The most eloquent articulator of the GAA's aspiration to be not merely a sporting body, but rather a way of life encompassing the social, cultural and political

spheres, he argued that the association instilled self-confidence and a sense of nationhood in the Irish people while also serving as an incubator for the country's ultimate re-Gaelicisation. Many members and players found this nationalistic speechifying a tiresome distraction from their sporting pursuits, and his opinionated, uncompromising manner made it easy to caricature him as an unimaginative dogmatist. Yet all, however grudgingly, respected his dedication and integrity. Moreover, his ideological grandstanding obscured an underlying pragmatism, and he was more approachable than first impressions suggested, having a capacity for arguing vigorously, even intemperately, over a matter of principle without bearing personal grudges.

He strongly upheld the prohibition on GAA members playing or even watching 'foreign games' (i.e., soccer, rugby, hockey and cricket), and the Cork county board gained a reputation for arbitrarily enforcing a widely flouted rule. However, in early 1971 a grassroots uprising forced its removal. Thereafter, he was foremost amongst a cohort of conservative administrators who reasserted their authority in the accustomed fashion: through exploiting obscure procedural mechanisms, and ambiguities or gaps in the official rules, to temper the spirit of the GAA's highly decentralised and democratic constitution. By these means they overcame the association's predilection towards paralysis, readying it for the challenges posed by rapid urbanisation, the advent of televised English soccer, and the loss of an effective monopoly status in rural areas.

He served on the McNamee commission, which conducted the first comprehensive review of the GAA during 1969–71 and made various ground-breaking recommendations. In 1972 he was appointed to the newly established management committee, which was vested with sweeping discretionary powers, and used them to implement aspects of the McNamee report, most notably appointing full-time local officials in large population centres and introducing a network of subcommittees to take over the duties and functions of the central council. As influenced by Murphy, these administrative reforms preserved the association's voluntary character while accommodating it to a degree of professionalism, enabling the energetic development of club facilities for recreational purposes with a view, triumphantly realised, to embedding the GAA physically within Ireland's social fabric.

In 1973 he stepped down as county secretary, making way for a full-time official, and became honorary secretary, with a special brief over efforts to build a modern GAA stadium in Cork city. He had pursued this project from the late 1950s, but it had stalled during the 1960s as the board's finances were exhausted by the need to invest in club grounds within Cork city. Finally, in 1974 the £1.7 million redevelopment of the Athletic Grounds venue into the 50,000-capacity Páirc Uí Chaoimh stadium began.

He was elected president of the GAA in 1976, having only reluctantly allowed his name to go forward, given his commitment to the Páirc Uí Chaoimh project and

the difficulties he experienced in raising funds. One of his first duties as president was to open the completed Páirc Uí Chaoimh. He also enjoyed presenting the Liam MacCarthy Cup exclusively to Corkmen as his native county claimed three successive all-Ireland hurling titles.

During his term (1976–9), he was praised for his administrative competence, impressing most obviously by his authoritative handling of the annual congress, which under his direction departed from tradition by finishing punctually. His role as chair of the management committee (attendant on the presidency) enabled him to exert a compelling influence over a habitually fractious organisation. Towards the end of his presidency, he was offered the position of director general of the association, but declined, regarding it as a posting for a younger man.

He prioritised the cultivation of close links with schools and universities and the provision of recreational facilities for youths. Internal opposition emerged to the acceptance of sponsorship from alcohol and tobacco companies and the serving of alcohol in GAA clubhouses, and although the P. J. Carroll cigarette company ceased sponsoring the GAA all stars awards, he successfully resisted efforts to revive the association's formerly austere attitude towards alcohol consumption and commercialism, arguing that additional revenues were needed for capital investment.

Conscious of the divergence in perspective and opinion between the relatively apolitical southern members and those north of the border who were subject to violence and intimidation at the hands of the British security forces and loyalists, he reaffirmed the GAA's commitment to a united Ireland and condemned the treatment of political prisoners without being overtly supportive of republican paramilitaries. He also indicated that the GAA might rescind its ban on members of the RUC and British military if the northern authorities softened their attitude towards the association. Conversely his fixation with nationalist totems provoked a furore in 1978 when he forbade four Cork hurlers from participating in a fundraising hockey match for the Irish hockey team because as a 32-county entity it did not use the Irish republic's flag or national anthem.

He became embroiled in, and somewhat radicalised by, the controversy between the Crossmaglen Rangers GAA club in south Armagh and the British army. Regarding Crossmaglen Rangers as the local IRA at play, the army requisitioned portions of club property for its base, destroyed facilities and harassed members, frequently landing helicopters on the pitch during matches. Fearing seizures of GAA property elsewhere, Murphy travelled to Crossmaglen in December 1976 and forcefully condemned the army's behaviour; two years later he held a press conference there to highlight the army's bad faith during negotiations held earlier in the year. By publicising the dispute and working ceaselessly to keep the matter in the media spotlight, he dissuaded the military from encroaching further.

In 1980 he led a GAA delegation to Westminster, holding inconclusive talks with the minister of state for Northern Ireland concerning Crossmaglen Rangers. Earlier that year, the GAA appointed him head of a subcommittee with responsibility for the issue; as such, he liaised with the Irish and British authorities and regularly undertook the long journey from Cork to Crossmaglen. In 1985 the British government paid £150,000 to Crossmaglen Rangers in compensation, and finally returned the requisitioned property in 1999.

In his last annual congress as president in 1979, he took the unusual step of openly supporting a successful motion changing the wording of rule 7, whereby the statement that the GAA was a non-political organisation was altered to describe it as non-party political. Congress immediately passed a series of politically charged motions, one of which, declaring support for the struggle for 'national liberation', prompted accusations that the GAA was ambivalent about republican violence. During the 1981 annual congress, Murphy's intervention led to the withdrawal of a motion condemning violence, and he also contradicted the GAA president by asserting that the association was a political organisation. However, steady internal and external criticisms, most significantly from the Gardaí, compelled the GAA to resile discreetly from the assertively nationalist position delineated by Murphy. In 1981 he contemplated running for the presidency again, being guaranteed the support of the Ulster delegates, but withdrew; he was a divisive figure and it was considered improper to serve more than one term.

Murphy served on the board of the RTÉ Authority (1979–85), being appointed by Taoiseach Jack Lynch, his former Cork teammate. (Although the two men differed fundamentally over Northern Ireland and the appropriate public function of the GAA, they maintained excellent personal relations, and when Lynch retired as TD in 1981, he unsuccessfully encouraged Murphy to run in his stead as a Fianna Fáil candidate.) Despite his status as the GAA's watchdog over the national broadcaster, in 1980 RTÉ televised a documentary outlining the GAA's apparent flirtation with militant nationalism, highlighting Murphy's role.

Remaining heavily involved and influential in the GAA, he continued as a Munster and central council delegate and served as chairman of the Cork county board (1985–7). His chairmanship was characterised by tense relations with the county secretary and selectors, and by criticisms for enabling anti-social behaviour by allowing Páirc Uí Chaoimh to be used for rock concerts and festivals as a means of redeeming the debt incurred in its construction. In 1991 he was instrumental in setting up the Cork minor board, acting as its founding chairman for four years. Opposed to permitting soccer and rugby matches in Croke Park, he was part of a group of former GAA presidents who delayed, but could not thwart, this development.

After retiring from the Southern Health Board in 1983, he owned and for fifteen years managed a petrol station in Bishopstown. He was made a freeman of Cork

city in 1995. In his final year he completed a voluminous research document with recommendations for the GAA's further development in Munster. He died at St Finbarr's Hospital, Cork, on 28 April 2007 and was buried in Innishannon.

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GRO (birth cert); *Ir. Press*, 3 Sept. 1942; 26 July 1944; 17 Sept. 1945; 31 Aug. 1946; 21 Dec. 1949; 4 Sept. 1950; 17 Sept. 1951; 29 Jan., 16 Apr. 1971; 13 Nov. 1975; 11, 13 Apr. 1977; 27 Mar., 16 Nov., 5 Dec. 1978; 23 Mar. 1979; 31 Mar., 18 July 1980; 5 Mar. 1985; 26 Mar., 9 Apr. 1987; Eamonn Andrews, *Honour to Cork* (1945); *Ir. Times*, 17 Oct. 1950; 4 Jan. 1968; 27 Jan. 1969; 23 Jan. 1970; 13 Feb., 29 Apr., 7 June 1976; 25 Jan., 11 Apr. 1977; 3 Feb., 27 Mar., 27 June, 14, 28 Dec. 1978; 26 Mar. 1979; 31 Mar., 11 Dec. 1980; 9 Jan., 9 Apr. 1981; 23 Apr. 1983; 7 Dec. 1984; 30 Apr. 1987; 26 May 1990; 19 Mar., 28 Nov. 1994; 12 Jan. 2002; 5 May 2007; *Ir. Independent*, 14 Sept. 1951; 30 Jan. 1967; 25 Jan. 1972; 11 Nov. 1976; 6 Jan., 27 Mar. 1981; 15 Nov. 1995; *Southern Star*, 13 Oct. 1951; 15 Mar. 1952; 15 Aug. 1953; 7 Nov. 1964; 5 Feb. 1972; 21 Feb. 1976; 2 Feb. 1985; 21 Nov. 1987; 30 Apr., 31 Oct. 1998; 8 July 1995; *Sunday Independent*, 13 Jan. 1963; 16 May 1976; 27 Feb. 1981; 5 Feb. 1995; Magill, 1 Dec. 1978; John Joe Brosnan and Diarmuid Ó Murchadha, *Cork GAA: A history 1886–1986* (1987); Con Short, *The Crossmaglen GAA story 1887–1987* (1987); Brendan Fullam, *Giants of the ash* (1991); Desmond Fahy, *How the GAA survived the troubles* (2001); *Ir. Examiner*, 30 Apr. 2007; *Hogan Stand*, 19 June 2007; Dermot Keogh, *Jack Lynch: a biography* (2008); Henry Martin, *Mick Mackey: hurling legend in a troubled country* (2011); 'Con Murphy graveside oration', [www.rebelgaa.com/news/news\\_item.asp?NewsID=1152](http://www.rebelgaa.com/news/news_item.asp?NewsID=1152); Weeshie Fogarty, 'Con Murphy', [www.terracetalk.com/articles/107/Con-Murphy](http://www.terracetalk.com/articles/107/Con-Murphy)