

# Milltown honoured its Irish Language past

A highlight of the year gone by for the people of Milltown was the splendid success of the O Locháin/Beirneach Centenary, organised by a dedicated group selected to mark the commemoration of some local anniversaries. All the group's careful planning and hard work drew praise from the community, and the pride that Milltown people have in their parish and its past was very much in evidence when the celebrations were held to pay tribute to two of its most talented sons, Micheál O Locháin and Fr. Liam O Beirn, who became well known as writers in the Irish language.

The death of Micheál O Locháin, from Curraghaderry, just over one hundred years ago, in 1899, coincided with the ordination the same year of his neighbour William Byrne to the priesthood. Fr. Byrne, later to become known as *An Beirneach*, died just over fifty years ago, in 1949, thus creating a third significant anniversary.

Due mainly to the efforts of Milltown-born priest Fr. Michael Flannery — himself a fluent Irish speaker who now ministers in Tully parish in the Connemara Gaeltacht — a special committee organised locally by well-known businessman Frank Glynn was set up to commemorate those events. Their work and enthusiasm for the project bore fruit with a remarkable turnout for the celebrations, with the large number of local people being augmented by several from neighbouring parishes and beyond.

The evening started with a simple but moving ceremony at Kilclooney Cemetery where a wreath was laid on the grave of *An Beirneach* by two of his surviving relatives, Tess Fitzpatrick of Carnageehy and Frank Quinn, Darrary near Garrafrauns, in the presence of Fr. Flannery and the committee. When Mass in Irish in St. Joseph's Church then followed there were nine priests with Milltown connections on the altar. Several more who are based overseas sent their good wishes and those people in the congregation who were experiencing their first *Aifreann as Gaeilge* remarked afterwards on the beauty of the occasion. Fr. Michael Flannery was chief celebrant and with him were the current priests of the parish Fr. J. J. Cribben P.P. and Canon John Cullinane, accompanied by Milltown natives Canon Seán Blake and Frs. John D. Flannery, Pádraig O'Connor, William Diskin (a member of the organising committee) and Peter Connolly with Fr. Bertie Flanagan, Ballyroe, Kilconly, home from Argentina.

The singing and music of the choir under the guidance of Eamonn O'Callaghan added greatly to the occasion, while members of the organising committee read *Paidreacha an Phobail* and gifts were brought to the altar by pupils of local national and secondary schools who won prizes for essays written about the two Irish language enthusiasts, in a competition organised by the committee.

After the spiritual part of the celebrations came the social one as the crowd moved to Sheridan's Lounge where committee chairperson Catherine Brennan welcomed the large gathering and acted as M.C. Fr. Michael Flannery was the first speaker and in a short but informative and



Tess Fitzpatrick and Frank Quinn at the grave in Kilclooney Milltown of Fr. William Byrne (*An Beirneach*).

entertaining lecture he outlined the life of Fr. William Byrne.

The man who grew up to be a priest known as *An Beirneach* was born at Carnageehy, Milltown in 1871 to Thomas and Brigid Byrne. His mother was formerly a Quinn from Darrary, Addergoole. The Irish he grew up with as a child "fostered in him a love of the language that played a major part in his life later on," said Fr. Michael. After receiving his early education in Ballindine and St. Jarlath's College, Tuam, he went to Maynooth College to study for the priesthood in 1892. He was ordained for the Tuam diocese on November 19th, 1899. As well as ministering in several parishes, his career as a writer blossomed and many fine works in Irish flowed from his pen. According to Fr. Flannery many of his essays were written under different pen-names such as *An Fear Mór Maol* and *Mac Pharaic Naomhtha*, while he won the Oireachtas prize of 1898 under the nom-de-plume *Sáirséal*. He contributed articles in Irish to many publications; he acted as a judge at *feiseanna*, was a collector of songs, had a famous book of short stories entitled *An Troid agus an tUaigneas* published in 1926 while *Seo Siúd* was his most famous book. He died in 1949 in the County Hospital Castlebar and is buried near the family plot in Kilclooney cemetery, Milltown.

Said Fr. Flannery: "He should be remembered in our prayers and the centenary of his ordination to the priesthood deserved a fitting celebration in memory of his contribution to faith, *tírghrá*, language and culture."

A musical interlude followed with a number of songs in Irish from Anne Sheridan of Milltown, a founder member of the group *Muighe Seola*. The multi-talented Greene family, who have already annexed a number of All-Ireland titles at *Fleadhanna Ceoil*, also contributed to the evening's entertainment as did Róisín Kelly — a prizewinner for her essay in Irish — who showed her versatility by singing a number of songs.

Cash prizes were then presented to the winners of the essay competition at primary and secondary school levels. As well as Róisín Kelly, the list included Caitriona McGrath, Elaine Connolly, Alan McWalter, Eamon Blake, Fiona Ruane, Michelle Comer, Michelle Hyland and Michael Brogan. Seán O Ceallacháin, who was one of the main organisers of the competition, presented the winners with their awards and then introduced the next speaker Fionnuala Uí Fhlannagáin who gave a lecture on Micheál O Locháin.

Ms. Uí Fhlannagáin, who has written a book entitled *Micheál O Locháin agus An Gaoth*, described him as a man acknowledged in America as the pioneer of the Gaelic

language movement there due to the trojan work he did in that country since founding *An Gaoth* in 1881, until his death in 1899.

The Curraghaderry native was born on September 29th, 1836. Like many children of that time, he did not attend school until he was nine years old, probably at a local hedge-school run by a local teacher Martin Doyle. Little is known of the rest of his education or indeed of his early career although it is understood he studied until he was eighteen. After qualifying as a teacher in St. Joseph's School, Brooklyn he began to teach there and he immediately started "a movement for the cultivation and preservation of the Irish language" as Ms. Uí Fhlannagáin said. She then described how he opened an Irish Language School first in Jefferson Hall and afterwards at the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Court Street. He later became known as Logan, presumably because the native Americans had difficulty in pronouncing the Gaelic name; he left teaching and became an estate agent, so successfully that he became relatively wealthy.

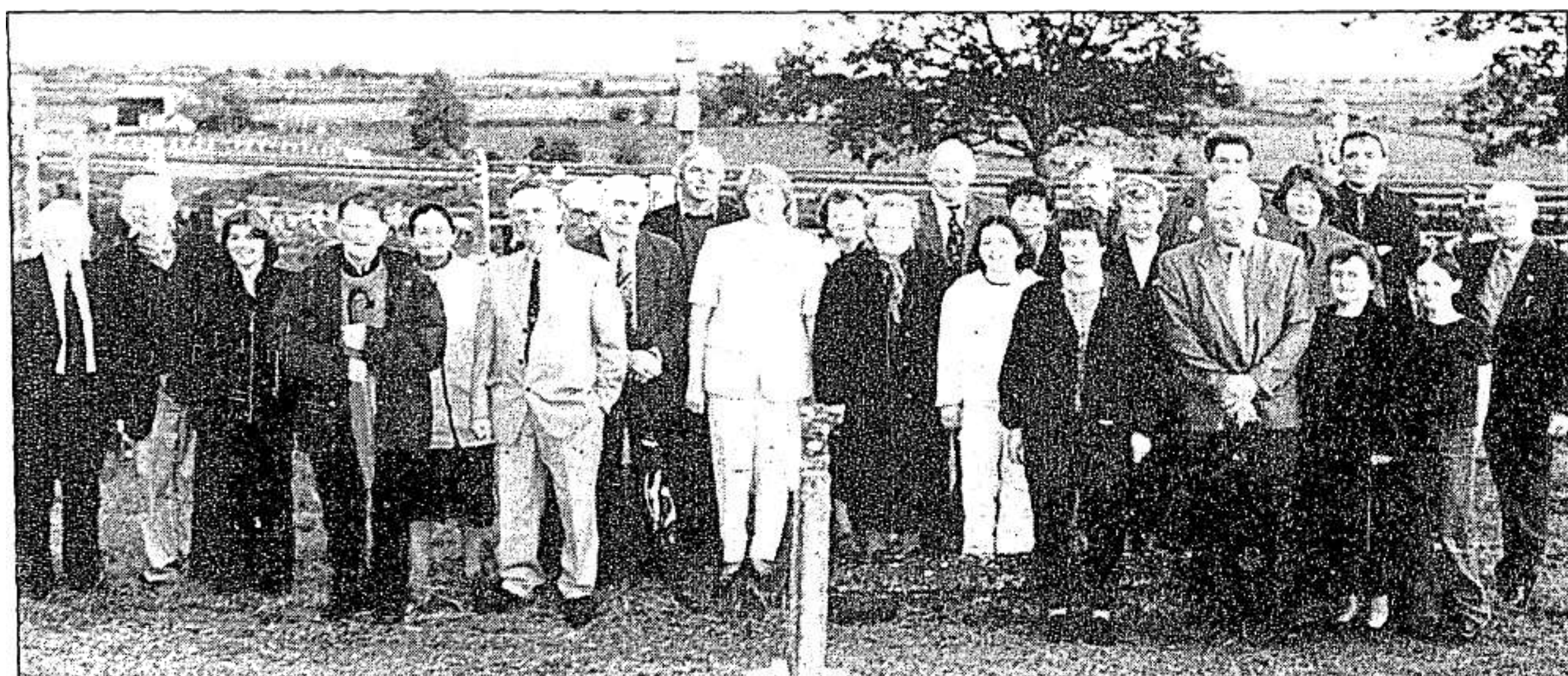
## Gaelic ingrained

However, much of his money went towards the cause of the Irish language. Harboring a deeply-ingrained love of Gaelic since his boyhood he devoted most of what little spare time he had towards its promotion. The population of New York at the time was 1,200,000 and about 200,000 of these were Irish with their native tongue as their cradle language.

As Ms. Uí Fhlannagáin said, O Locháin penned many letters to the "Irish World" urging the study of Irish. She described how he organised Irish classes, founded *Philo-Celtic societies* and later on *Gaelic societies*. By 1884 there were so many Gaelic societies that he was able to found a National Gaelic Society and he became its first secretary. He started *An Gaoth*, a bi-lingual paper for the Brooklyn Philo-Celtic Society. Later he was owner, editor and printer of it and, reflecting his great patriotism and *Tír-Grá*, he worked tirelessly until in 1897 he was able to boast that he had been printing 1,440 copies a month for ten years. He also contributed articles in Irish to the *Brooklyn Citizen* and *The Irish World* in order to further his aims and he continued to spread the gospel of the *Teanga Dúchais* until his death in 1899.

After Fionnuala had finished her lecture, the official part of the programme was complete but some animated discussion ensued between locals and visitors on two remarkable Milltown men who showed courage, patriotism and love of language. Their formal recognition was long overdue.

— Noel Carney



Committee members friends and guests at the O Locháin/Beirneach anniversary ceremony