

Go in to any bookshop in Ireland and you'll find books by, or about, leading GAA figures – mostly ghost-written stories about the stars of the game.

These books recall the greats: great players, great matches, great campaigns. Stories played out on a national stage, stories that live on in the collective sporting memories of GAA fans the world over.

Just before Christmas, Paul Gannon, Principal of Eagles Nest National School, in Renvyle, published a very different kind of GAA book. His is a book that looks at the organisation in the sociological and ideological heartland where it means the most – in the parish.

A sporting history in four volumes, *Pride in the Parish* is a collection of first-hand recollections from the parish of Letterfrack-Ballinakill, interspersed with newspaper reports from the earliest days of the GAA. The end result is an engaging,

Pride, passion and the heart of the parish

Paul Gannon's remarkable new book on the Gaelic sporting history of Letterfrack-Ballinakill captures what it is to live the GAA experience. By **Tony Kiely**

meticulously researched and fascinating time-lapse picture of Letterfrack-Ballinakill – not just of the impact of the GAA on daily life, but also a revealing social portrait of a small parish like so many others around the country, a parish with GAA in its blood.

The seeds of the project were sown in 2004, when Renvyle GAA was marking its 75th anniversary and Paul suggested that a

book on the history of the club could mark that important milestone.

Circumstances at the time meant that writing a book on the club's history wasn't possible. But Paul was undeterred, and set about finding a new angle to record the story of his club.

'I still wanted to write the history, so I thought: How am I going to do this? And gradually a holistic, parochial approach emerged – and Renvyle GAA Club

became a constituent part of the book, instead of the main focus.

'This allowed me to look at the achievements of players from the area who had gone on to great success with their schools, or with different clubs, sometimes after emigration. There are remarkable stories of lads who would have played in highly contentious local derbies here in Connemara but then, after emigrating, found they were playing alongside their old rivals in teams like Connemara Gaels, in New York, and John Mitchells in London.'

For many people, any discussion of the GAA in Letterfrack-Ballinakill might understandably focus on Renvyle GAA Club – but as Paul's research progressed, he found there were many strands to the rich tapestry of GAA life interwoven into the history of his parish.

'I never intended to write four volumes, but the more I delved into the research, the more I discovered stories of handball, athletics and cycling in the parish,' he explains.

Letterfrack-Ballinakill is by no means unique in this regard – handball, cycling and athletics in particular were central to the organisation's early history – but Paul's project of recording the entire GAA history of a parish is unprecedented.

'I decided to look at the Catholic, ecclesiastical jigsaw piece that is my parish and find out if there were any fine exponents of these other aspects of the GAA. I discovered that in the 1970s, for example, there was an athletics club in operation. In 1931 there was a meeting in the Town Hall in Clifden to establish a West Connemara Athletics Club – and that happened again in 2007. Both clubs only lasted a year – but they existed nonetheless.'



PHOTO: STEPHANIE SALMON PHOTOGRAPHY

The process of producing the books was a long one. Some eight years have passed since Paul started the project, and in that time Gráinne Mhaols LGFA – which was founded by Paul in 2001 (Paul still manages the senior team) – has grown and achieved so much that the club now has a history of its own that Paul wanted to record. And so that became part of the project, too.

'To understand the true spirit of the Gaelic sporting experience, you have to appreciate that it encompasses cycling, handball, athletics and LGFA just as much as the GAA.'

'There's still a lot of disdain and chauvinism when it comes to ladies football, but there's nothing I've seen in men's football that I haven't seen in ladies football. To me, the skill set is one and the same.'

This first volume deals with athletics, cycling and men's and women's football up to 1970. The second volume, due out later this year, will look at hurling and men's club football up to 2012. Volume 3 features scór, tug of war, men's football abroad, in Kilbride and Inishbofin, and ladies football from 1970-2004. Volume four records ladies football from 2005-2012, handball and Gaelic football in schools, up to third level.

As well as charting the history of Letterfrack-Ballinakill GAA, Paul says he wanted to write a book that 'someone anywhere in the world could read if they want to fully understand the Gaelic sporting experience'.

Unlike other books on the subject, this is not a book about the GAA greats. Rather, it's a book about all that makes the GAA great.

Paul explains: 'Your life could be at a low ebb, but once you head out on that field on a Sunday, it's like nothing else matters. If you win, if you beat your neighboring parish,

if you score the winning goal – then you're on top of the world. You head off for a few pints and a chat afterwards with the lads. And you're part of something.'

There is, of course, the flip side of that scenario – when you lose. And even though you're still part of something, those drinks and post-match discussions might take on an altogether different tone. But more than that, there are the losses you can never leave behind – and Paul's book brings that lingering sense of loss into dramatic focus.

Speaking at the launch, in GMIT Letterfrack last month, Paul's father, Paddy, recalled the 1953 County Minor A Championship final in Oughterard between Clifden and Headford/Caherlistrane. It was a game that Paddy believes Clifden could have – and should have – won. The pain and the emotion of that loss is still evident in his recollections in the book (an edited extract is reproduced on page 24 of this month's *Journal*):

'It still pains me greatly when I recall that fateful day in 1953... It has always been my opinion that we should have been given the opportunity to play out the remaining ten minutes [the match was abandoned by the referee because of "atrocious" weather conditions] and live our lives in the happiness and satisfaction of a job well done'.

Paul suggests that some of that old passion is now, perhaps, lacking in the GAA as a whole. The culture of alcohol that affects all strands of society hasn't left the GAA untouched, and games are cancelled, just here and there, in a fashion that would once have been unimaginable.

'With this book, I wanted to communicate to young people that the club is something worth preserving,' Paul explains, 'and that the history of the club is something that's worth knowing.'

Pictured at the launch of *Pride in the Parish* in December are (left to right): Thady Salmon, Petie Kane, Paddy Gannon, Paul Gannon, Mary Gannon, Michael Joe Ruddy, Cllr Eileen Mannion, Johnny Fitzpatrick and Oliver McDonnell

'In terms of our cultural heritage, we might look to our music, literature or the physical landscape – the crannógs and ancient burial sites of Ireland. But the heritage of your local club, of your parish, is just as important, and just as relevant.'

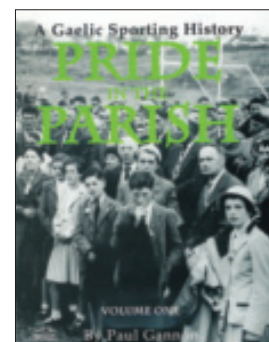
'So when I was writing *Pride in the Parish*, I thought of the likes of Cusack and Davin, the visionaries that sat in Hayes Hotel in 1884, and I wanted to see if my parish of Letterfrack-Ballinakill has achieved what they wanted every parish in Ireland to achieve. I wanted to answer the question: Has my parish done them proud? Has it fulfilled the ideals of the GAA?'

And with eight years of research under his belt, and the first of four remarkable and unique volumes of sporting history now published, Paul can answer his own question:

'Yes. My parish has done itself proud.'

● *Pride in the Parish* is available at selected outlets throughout Connemara

● The first of a series of edited extracts from *Pride in the Parish* is published on page 24



Pride in the Parish
Paul Gannon
(Email, €25)

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than you might think

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