



St. Conleth's College



From Claude Road to Clyde Road

: A Tribute to Kevin Kelleher

A couple of decades ago I went to a funeral – the funeral of an old man. It was Kevin's father, and after the service I was outside with the usual condolences and support and I noticed that there was a special quality about the old men who were there, paying tribute to one of their peers. They were lean and sinewy and strong, frames slightly smaller perhaps than when they were young but there was a special quality about them. And it was some time afterwards that I discovered that they were all on the football All-Ireland Dublin winning teams of 1906, 1907 and 1908 ... a special breed, and our man shows very clearly that he comes from a special breed.

What kind of man is Kevin Kelleher? He has been around for a while. Born in the back room of 17 Claude Road, Drumcondra, the family house. Educated at St. Patrick's Primary School. First Communion in the Woodner by the 'Bots'. Secondary at O'Connell Schools and, of course, eventually UCD where he took his BA and H. Dip.

I'm afraid I have to say that he does have a criminal indictment on his CV. You see there was a wall at the end of Claude Road and they used to play tennis against it. An aspiring, perspiring member of the Garda Síochána caught them, hauled up to the station, fingerprinted them, eyeball tested them, photographed them (it might have been sketches in those days). However I am sure that by now that the Statute of Limitations, whether it is seven or seventy years, has wiped the crime from his C.V.!

After a brief sojourn in Kostka College as a teacher after his H.Dip, he came to St Conleth's in 1944 with youth, enthusiasm and a huge capacity for work.

Let me remind you just briefly what 1944 was like. Charles de Gaulle, on 25th August, walked up the aisle of Notre Dame to say a prayer of thanksgiving for the Liberation of Paris, while the bullets of the Waffen SS bounced from the ancient stones of the Cathedral. This is history. It is a long time ago, but it's not that long. I remember it well. I remember the crackling radio...

What was Ireland like in 1944? Here in Clyde Road, and where we all lived? Rationing, no coal, no cars, very little tea. Taxis, the occasional one had gas balloons on the roof so that they could run. No coffee,

no oranges, no lemons, no bananas. None of the things that we see as everyday necessities today. There was no central heating, you kept yourself warm by drying the wet turf around the one fire in the house so it could be dry enough to burn. And there was a famous character called the Glimmerman: he was a uniformed detested Gestapo-like servant of the powers-that-be who went into people's houses and placed his hand upon the cooker, in case that gas had been used during the forbidden hours.

And 1944 was when I started school in St Conleth's and Kevin started teaching. I was there from 1944 to 1952 Leaving Cert. and when I came to the school he never ceased to upbraid me for the undeveloped state of my handwriting which he blamed on the Montessori School which had coped with me before. So much so that he has never ceased to mention it to me. When I was a student here in St Conleth's, Bernard Sheppard was the chief, the boss. I remember when I was in 4th year, they had just opened the first of the new Michael Scott classrooms and Bernard brought in his fiancée and he introduced us all to her by name, Pat. That was 55 years ago and she has been one of the rocks upon which St Conleth's stands every day since.

Some of you remember perhaps the dark days of the mid-50s when Bernard was struck down early by illness and eventually succumbed. It was a great tragedy but St. Conleth's didn't succumb thanks to Kevin and Pat and to the late, great Michael Murphy. And to "an doctuir beag uafasach", Caoimhín Ó'Gualáin, said to be the only man who could write with style in ancient Irish. He was one of the greats too.

The school continued to thrive. Kevin and Pat's marriage was a sign and seal on a partnership that endured. So that what we have now is something bigger and better and growing still, without ever having lost its rationale. It used to be the school for the sons of Catholic gentlemen. Well the daughters soon fixed that! From our lady president downwards, there are many of them here. And although the truth can be told by looking at the photographs in the corridor and following the dates, to my mind, they all look so gorgeous that the dates must be wrong.

One of the elements of St Conleth's maturity is the devotion that Kevin and Pat and Ann have given to the physical development of the school, the building programme. I have to say that as the first architectural graduate from the school I have been singularly honoured to be appointed to advise them as architect. And it's an on-going source of real pride that I can see not just the school but its facilities grow and we're not finished yet! My clients are Kevin and, particularly, Ann and I'd like to mention her here: I cannot say enough for her determination, imagination, foresight and pragmatism. Ann Sheppard is daunted by nothing and never will be.

Let me refer to Kevin's achievements, because this is about him, in other fields. Hurling medals in Croke Park while a schoolboy, played with the Fenians, a dangerous game surely. He received an invitation which he accepted to be secretary of the Leinster school tennis association at one stage. I wonder if they checked his record from

Claude Road! He won the ASTI golf cup. (The file on his handicap was lost, by the way.) And, most importantly, since 1962 he has been the honorary secretary of the Leinster Branch IRFU schools' division. For 53 years he has run those magnificent competitions. Each year more teams, more divisions, more boys playing the game of rugby.

A hundred thousand euro on the gate for the schools cup final at Lansdowne Road, it practically keeps the Leinster Branch alive. Prime time television is there, media coverage, and it's all run by our KDK. No wonder they call him the boss!

I have a little story about this. One of the things about schools rugby that gives me tremendous pleasure is that what they call the weaker schools now have their own competition and two schools go through to meet the big boys.

And one particular year I remember, and I remember it particularly because one of my sons and one of my nephews were both on the team. The match that mattered was up in Templeville and I went up there to see it and as I got out of my car who did I meet but the boss. He shook his head and he said "You know Michael, we don't really want to win this, we could get into awful trouble. We could meet Clongowes or Blackrock. It really would be better if we didn't win it." "Get away out of that!" said I "We're going to win it and win it well!" We went decorously to the bar beside the pitch, to the railing and we looked at the match. And David Moore got a great try and they just got ahead of Kilkenny and kind of near the end of the match, there was a point or two in it and the line was under siege. None of you ever saw it but I'll take it to my grave. He was roaring at the referee, climbing the rails, insulting touch judges. It is a side of him I had never seen before and thank God the heart and the passions that he sometimes hides came to the surface that day. The boys won the match.

But let's not forget KDK's own prowess in the great game of rugby. I have to say with some pride and some trepidation that I once played on the same team with him. Lansdowne Schoolboys were short one and he filled in. But the reason why he got the job at St Conleth's was about rugby because Michael Murphy used to take the under 14s over to some school that had a similar team and Michael Murphy was a Limerick hurler at whatever level and his attitude and idea was that you had to win. So when our under 13s had large guys with five o'clock shadows appearing and complaints coming from the other schools, Bernard Sheppard decided it was time to get a rugby man in and that's really how Kevin arrived.

When he gave up playing, he took up refereeing and he was quite good at it. In fact not only was he good, he was the best referee in Ireland, in Europe and probably in the world. And he may well have been the best ever.

Just look at this CV!

1960: Wales v Scotland
1961: Wales v England and England v Scotland
1962: Scotland v England, Wales v France
1963: Wales v England, Wales v France
1964: England v Wales, Romania v France
1965: France v Scotland, Wales v England, Scotland v England –



Mr Kelleher and Recent Alumni Adam O'Brien and Matt McCoy

three? Three in five nations? He must have been pretty good and he was.

1966: Wales v France, Wales v Australia

1967: England v Australia, France v Scotland, Scotland v Wales and the last match in 1967 Scotland v New Zealand, do I need to tell you the story? Surely the great man has mentioned it himself...

He was so unpopular/in demand in New Zealand that 20 years later they flew him out for Colin Meads' "This is your Life". But when asked on the New Zealand program, would he do it again considering everything, he said that "...if he did what he did, of course I'd do it again." His career went on through '69, '70 and '71 finishing with France v Scotland in Paris. He was 38 when he did his first match and 49 when he did his last one. There is no referee in the modern days when they do 7 and 8 a year who could compare to that list. It's fantastic.

Since retirement, he has kept up the rugby connection and devoted himself unselfishly, sometimes to enormous personal loss and with demands on time and money and everything else, to his great loves; Pat, Ann, Cian of course, but transcending all, to St. Conleth's. I leave you with a quotation from someone who could pen it better than I could because I think it fits:

**Constant as the northern star
of whose true-fix'd and resting quality
there is no fellow in the firmament
the skies are painted with unnumbered sparks
they are all fire and every one doth shine
but there's but one in all doth hold his place:
so in the world; 'tis furnish'd well with men
and men are flesh and blood and apprehensive
yet in the number I do know but one
that unassailable holds on his rank
unshaked of motion**

Biography: Michael O'Dea, Class of 1952, has a long connection with St. Conleth's and has been the architect of the school's recent development. This article is an adaption of the speech he gave at the PPU dinner to mark KDK's 60 years in St Conleth's.