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# *Muintir versus Macra: the Parish Plan for Agriculture, 1947-1957*

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## Introduction

In a previous article the ill-fated history of the Tipperary-based co-operative society Muintir na Tire Limited was recounted.<sup>1</sup> The collapse of the society and its replacement in 1937 by a more broadly based national organisation using the guild structure gave rise to a reinvigorated movement under the guidance of Fr. John M. Hayes.<sup>2</sup> From its Tipperary base Muintir na Tire quickly attracted members<sup>3</sup> in Munster and began to promote its ideals of self-help and local development in Catholic parishes throughout rural Ireland.

In terms of guild project activity the limited picture available to us in *The Handbook*<sup>4</sup> suggests that most guilds were initially involved in endeavours which sought to reduce the hardships being imposed by the "Emergency". Along with a wide variety of recreational activities, Muintir na Tire's guilds included fuel and vegetable allotment schemes among their activities in the 1940s.

In the town of Tipperary specifically, Muintir na Tire was responsible for running a hot meals scheme for 100 of what it defined as the town's "deserving poor". Drawing from a subvention made possible by the operation of a Penny in The Pound Scheme, Muintir na Tire provided 800 hot meals a week. The cost to those using the scheme was twopence a meal for adults; children were charged half of this amount.<sup>5</sup>

Seventy women, all members of the Ladies Section of the Tipperary guild of Muintir na Tire, were actively involved in preparing the meals. There were six cooking teams of 8 to 10 women responsible for running the Muintir na Tire Restaurant in the local CYMS Hall; £7 per week was collected in the Penny in The Pound Scheme and local farmers were requested to donate vegetables to the project.<sup>6</sup>

This article examines Muintir na Tire's two key undertakings at national level in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. It describes Muintir na Tire's involvement in the electrification of rural Ireland and its attempts to organise a development plan for agriculture. Muintir na Tire's experiences in Co. Tipperary in terms of the workings of both of these projects are instructive in that they show how Muintir na Tire found itself in conflict with Macra na Feirme. The Parish Plan for Agriculture demonstrates that Muintir na Tire was far from consistent in its relationship with the State.

As Varley and Ó Cearbhaill note,<sup>7</sup> although Muintir na Tire conformed in theory to the principle of State subsidiarity which typified Catholic social teaching, individual guilds and indeed the national organisation itself courted State support and involvement in project activities such as rural electrification and agricultural development. Despite the difficulties encountered in these two projects, they mark the high points in Muintir na Tire's national activity under the leadership of Fr. Hayes.



## Rural Electrification Scheme

In the aftermath of Muintir na Tire's "Emergency" work, the first major project which the movement embarked on was the promotion of the Rural Electrification Scheme.<sup>8</sup> Muintir na Tire and the Rural Electrification Organisation (REO) shared similar objectives. A rural electrification scheme would go far to redress the imbalance between urban and rural Ireland by improving the availability of facilities and amenities. Speaking at the switch-on in Bansha, Co. Tipperary, on 24 May 1948, Fr. Hayes stated: "No material instrument can do so much to uplift the rural people and give them a status in accordance with their important position in the nation. Rural people who supply the fundamental necessities for the whole nation should at least have an equal right to the amenities of the nation ... it is more than an amenity, it is a revolution which will sweep away inferiority complexes."<sup>9</sup>

The task facing the REO in promoting the electrification of rural Ireland was a daunting one. In the face of ignorance, hostility and superstition some form of local network to canvass initially for the electrification of an area was needed. Muintir's almost immediate recruitment by the REO to promote electrification locally (aside from Muintir's obvious desire to brighten rural life) was further cemented by the fact that the man chosen to lead the REO – W.F. Roe – was also a prominent Muintir activist.

The guilds of Muintir na Tire carried out a preliminary canvass of an area to ascertain the level of support for (and possible hostility and opposition to) rural electrification. Hayes was well aware of the possibility of conflict in attempting to implement the scheme. "Certain people might object, but in order for all to benefit, all must submit themselves."<sup>10</sup>

In ideological terms Muintir's involvement and enthusiasm for the Rural Electrification Scheme both at local and national level raised an important question. Clearly, in promoting rural electrification the movement was unleashing a modernisation process which would unalterably change the face of rural life. Yet the movement's ideas were firmly aimed at promoting traditional values and ideas. Muintir na Tire saw itself as an organisation dedicated to the development of rural communities, and in attempting to carry out this work it justified its existence by appealing to traditional values.

Ideologically, it seems that Muintir na Tire was intent on preserving traditional values, yet in practice the movement's development work certainly played a part in hastening social change in rural communities. In practice the Rural Electrification Scheme witnessed a degree of conflict break out between Muintir na Tire and Macra na Feirme. Like Muintir na Tire, the recently founded Macra na Feirme (1944) was supportive of the REO in both the official and preliminary canvassing of an area. In some places, Muintir na Tire and Macra na Feirme collaborated in the promotion of Rural Electrification. However, conflicts did arise. The counterclaims of both organisations were based on a tension between Muintir na Tire's vocationalism and Macra na Feirme's more sectional orientation. In some cases the latter organisation was simply stronger in terms of numerical strength.

A contest arose in 1948 between the parishes of Bansha and Cahir, Co. Tipperary to see which parish would be first to be electrified. The former parish (of which Fr. Hayes was parish priest) was a Muintir stronghold, while Macra na Feirme was the dominant organisation in Cahir. Shiels notes that when "Bansha was selected on the basis of a better economic return, although Cahir had a better sign-up, a deputation from Cahir called on W.F. Roe to protest against alleged favouritism."<sup>11</sup>



## Parish Plan for Agriculture

The hostility which developed between Muintir na Tire and Macra na Feirme during the Rural Electrification Scheme was, however, quite mild compared to the conflict between both organisations during the Parish Plan for Agriculture. In 1947 the National Executive Committee of Muintir na Tire appointed an Agricultural Sub-Committee to which it delegated the task of devising a plan of action for the movement. Its 1938 Constitution had already acknowledged the primacy of agricultural advancement in terms of both the movement's work and the population of rural Ireland as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

The sub-committee put forward its findings to the National Executive in November 1947. Its proposed plan for agricultural development would be based on the parish unit and operated by Muintir's Parish Councils in conjunction with assistance from agricultural advisers from the Department of Agriculture. The Agriculture Sub-Committee recommended the following:

1. That Parish Councils should carry out surveys of the agricultural needs of their areas and study the existing schemes with a view to deciding how far the needs could be met.
2. The need for extension of agricultural instruction.
3. That agriculture advisers should be provided for comparatively small areas, so that they could establish intimate contact with the farmer's doorstep.
4. That an experiment be carried out with such small areas in the case of 6 representative parishes in different parts of the country.<sup>13</sup>

Between February and August 1948 Muintir na Tire, armed with its Parish Plan, courted the new Minister for Agriculture, James Dillon, to gain his support. Dillon and his department proved quite willing to listen. The Parish Plan itself, as devised by Prof. James Hogan (UCC) and P.J. Meghen (Limerick County Manager), involved the sending of an agricultural adviser to each parish. The adviser was to live in the area, familiarising himself with both the people and the particular agricultural problems which beset the area.

Muintir's Guild would play a facilitatory role, holding lectures, demonstrations and providing a Parish Plan Office to disseminate agricultural advice. The Pilot Scheme of the Parish Plan began in Bansha in November 1948,<sup>14</sup> with two more pilot schemes following in Tydavnet Co. Monaghan, and Ardee Co. Louth in 1949. The first of these locations was chosen out of an obvious deference to Fr. Hayes, while Ardee happened to be in Dillon's constituency.

From the outset of the Parish Plan, Hayes was to a certain extent conscious of the possible problems which such a plan might bring in practice. Mindful of the difficulties<sup>15</sup> which Muintir na Tire's previous incarnation as a co-operative society had experienced in terms of the non-participation of farm labourers, he warned Muintir na Tire that "... when they spoke of agriculture they must not think of farmers only. Even from an economic point of view the labourer could play a big part in pig, poultry and fruit production."<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps Hayes was in many ways over-optimistic in seeing the plan as all-embracing for all aspects of parish life, in that in reality it was singularly geared towards agricultural improvement. One might at this juncture pose the question: who in real or economic terms might benefit from the scheme?

Following the introduction of the Parish Plan Pilot Scheme, the operation of the plan itself ran into several difficulties. In 1950 the Parish Plan proper in counties Tipperary, Westmeath and Longford was postponed, because the persons appointed to work the scheme had declined to accept the terms offered.<sup>17</sup> This dispute coincided with Dillon's radical alteration of the original single Parish Plan to a Three Parish Plan, whereby an instructor would be made available to every group of three parishes in the congested districts.<sup>18</sup>



Significantly, it was also proposed that the scheme would be open not only to Muintir na Tire but also to bodies like Macra na Feirme and the National Farmers Association (NFA).<sup>19</sup> At first the movement reacted impetuously, stating that regardless of Dillon's sizeable modifications to the Parish Plan, Muintir's original idea would be put into practice without any assistance from the Department of Agriculture<sup>20</sup>

The change in Government in July 1951 brought further difficulties for the Parish Plan. Fianna Fail saw the plan (although devised in its original form by Muintir na Tire independently) as bearing Dillon's stamp; it was therefore shelved, and Muintir itself fell victim to the partisan conflict which it had from its inception so vehemently opposed.<sup>21</sup>

The year 1954 saw the return both of Dillon to power and the Three Parish Plan. This time Muintir responded stoically to the Minister's changes. That it had changed from being resolutely opposed to any changes being made by the Department of Agriculture to its original plan was clear in its decision to appoint a sub-committee in 1954 to deal with the implications for Muintir na Tire of the Minister's proposed revisions.

After some debate Muintir na Tire proved willing to work the Three Parish Plan for Agriculture, as was evidenced in 1955 with the following groupings of Muintir parishes; (i) Bansha/Cahir and Galbally [Co. Tipperary]; (ii) Kilcornan/Kildimo and Pallaskenry, Co. Limerick; (iii) Tydavnet/Threemilehouse and Smithboro, Co. Monaghan. All were prepared to operate the Three Parish Plan; in the face of the State's demands the movement showed itself to be malleable.

In 1954, with the return of the Parish Plan, an open and sometimes hostile debate took place between both organisations. In criticising Muintir na Tire's position on the Parish Plan, Macra na Feirme focused on the former movement's ideological position *vis-a-vis* the state and decentralisation, its leadership profile, and its organisational structure.

The question of sectionalism *versus* vocationalism also came into play. Macra na Feirme (themselves advocates of decentralisation) argued that Muintir was in fact "contradicting its own principles by calling in the State to participate in its work which it is already doing badly."<sup>22</sup>

Macra strongly opposed the proposed Three Parish Plan, arguing that the revised plan involved direct State control over the agricultural advisory services. Whatever doubts Macra had expressed on the Muintir Parish Plan, the proposed changes would in their eyes accentuate the onset of state controlled farming. This criticism underlined a central problem which faced Muintir na Tire during this episode. In terms of operationalising a community self-help project, how much power should external agencies have in deciding the fate of such activities?

Macra's second criticism was levelled at the movement's leadership profile. It claimed that the organisers and the majority of the executive member of the movement were not in fact farmers. Muintir, it claimed, had "very little qualifications for managing the research and development of Irish farming", and "Many of the officials of the organisation are national school teachers and curates who believe that the slow development of Irish farming is the fault of our farmers."<sup>23</sup>

Macra na Feirme's criticisms may have been correct in regard to the membership profile of the movement's national executive. Both the co-operative society Muintir na Tire Ltd. and Muintir na Tire itself were dominated at national level by Catholic clergymen and urban based professionals such as doctors and solicitors. Yet farmers were by far the most dominant vocational group involved in the leadership structure of Muintir na Tire's Guilds.

This was found to be the case in a majority of such Guilds throughout its history.<sup>24</sup> McNabb found that in neighbouring Co. Limerick in the 1960s Muintir na Tire's guilds were accused by

farm labourers of being dominated by farmers and the professional classes.<sup>25</sup> That Macra na Feirme chose to ignore this significant fact was evident also in their critique of the administrative wing of the guild, the Parish Council.

Because it was broadly constituted in terms of attempting to bring together the various vocational or occupational groups, Macra na Feirme doubted the Guild's suitability *vis-a-vis* an agricultural advisory role. In Macra's opinion the Parish Council corresponded "more to a local production council composed of shopkeepers, labourers and teachers working with a State-paid agent to spur the lazy farmer".<sup>26</sup> Macra na Feirme's polemic ignored the fact that farmers had played quite a significant role in Muintir's work since its foundation in 1931.

To a large extent Muintir na Tire failed to reply adequately to Macra na Feirme's criticisms. It chose to steer clear of Macra's criticisms of both the movement's leadership profile and its organisational structure. Muintir was sticking to its vocationalist guns: "Our plan is all embracing for all aspects of Parish Life. The agricultural aspect of it is fitting in with the whole idea of the parish as the basic unit of a Christian social order."<sup>27</sup>

Hayes did, however, respond to the question posed by Macra on State control and decentralisation. Rejecting outright the notion that Muintir had placed itself under the tentacles of State control, he argued that Muintir na Tire was only accepting the help of the Government in introducing the Parish Plan. "Naturally, we are prepared to accept any aid to which as citizens of the nation we are entitled."<sup>28</sup> Hayes argued that the plan was in the hands of its parish councils and therefore "in the hands of all the people in the parish."

The attitude of Muintir na Tire's founder explains to a large extent the reasons why in practice the parish Plan was doomed to failure. Was it wise of Muintir na Tire to think that the rest of the parish would be motivated to help operate a scheme which on the face of it would bring direct benefits only to farmers? The failure of the Parish Plan highlighted also the fact that the fate of large scale undertakings by community self-help groups may in reality lie outside of the community.

## Conclusion

At both local and national levels Muintir na Tire carried out important development work in parishes of rural Ireland. Taken collectively, this development work may be seen as an attempt towards the reconstruction of community relations in post civil war Ireland. Even though Muintir na Tire's activities may have been part of a wider process of social change in rural Ireland, it drew from a raft of conservative Catholic social thought in order to underpin its existence.

Muintir na Tire's ideology did not in any way challenge the *status quo*. Its guild structure acknowledged the class divide in rural Ireland, especially the divide between farmer and farm labourer. However, the unequal basis of such relations was never questioned. The practice of community development as defined by Muintir na Tire drew on a consensus approach which in practice often failed to materialise.

As with its predecessor Muintir na Tire Limited, at parish level Muintir na Tire's activities were affected by conflict between class and other interest groups. Its failure to address differences between the propertied and non-propertied classes may be seen as indicative of its social conservatism. It also meant that the kind of rural Ireland Muintir was intent on saving (if it ever actually existed in the first place) was not to be for everybody, because the social and economic system which they failed to question was a significant causal factor in the change and decline of rural Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s.



## FOOTNOTES

1. Eoin Devereux (1995), "Class, Community and Conflict" in *THJ*, 1995, pp. 94-102.
2. Hayes, John M. (1887-1957), b. Co. Limerick, ordained priest 1913; founded Muintir na Tire 1931 in line (ultimately) with current Papal social theory; lectured in Ireland and U.S.; P.P. of Bansha, 1946. Adapted from entry (p. 128) in *Modern Irish Lives*, ed. McRedmond (Gill-Macmillan, 1996).
3. It had a total of 106 guilds by 1945, with the greatest number of guilds in Limerick (23); Tipperary (17) and Cork (17). Nationally, its greatest number of guilds stood at 350 in 1950. Figures compiled from a combination of *Rural History, The Landmark* and Guild Affiliation Records held at Canon Hayes House, Tipperary.
4. First published in 1941.
5. Stephen Rynne, *Fr. John Hayes* (Clonmore and Reynolds, 1960), pp. 178-179.
6. See File No. S 10816, The Files of The Taoiseach's Department, National Archives.
7. Diarmuid Ó Cearbhaill and Tony Varley: "A Community Development's Experience of Crisis Conditions: Muintir na Tire's Struggle For Survival" in *Journal of the Community Development Society* (1996), in Vol. 27, No. 1.
8. F. A. McGrath: "Rural Electrification", in *The Handbook* (1945) and "Rural Electrification", in *Inealtoir* (1949).
9. Michael Shiels: *The Quiet Revolution* (O'Brien Press, 1984), p. 183. See also *REO News*, No. 8, July 1948.
10. John Hayes File, in RTE Radio Archives, Dublin (programme broadcast 7.10.1948).
11. Shiels, *op. cit.*
12. Muintir na Tire Constitution (1938) Tipperary: Muintir na Tire Publications.
13. "The Parish Plan" (ND) author not specified, but probably Professor J. Lyons, published by Muintir na Tire Rural Publications (1948). See also "Our Parish Production Plan" in *The Landmark*, September 1948, pp. 3-9 and J. Lyons: "Better Farming by The Parish", in *Rural Ireland* (1949).
14. Hayes speaking at Bansha, as reported in *Tipperary Star*, 6.11.1948.
15. Devereux, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-102.
16. See *The Irish Times*, 3.6.1950.
17. See *Dail Debates*, Vol. 123, p. 1743.
18. *Ibid.*
19. See *The Landmark*, November 1951, p. 3.
20. See *The Landmark*, August 1951, p. 12.
21. See Macra na Feirme's views on the Parish Plan in the statement by P. F. Quinlan (President) and H. Meredith (Chairman) in *The Irish Farmers Journal*, 28.8.1954, Vol. 35, p. 2, and *Meath Chronicle*, 27.8.1955.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Hayes speaking at Roscrea Rural Week, as reported in *Tipperary Star*, 14.8.1954.
24. See Eoin Devereux (1988): "The Theory and Practice of Community Development: Muintir na Tire 1931-1988", unpublished MA Thesis, University College, Galway.
25. Patrick McNabb: "Social Structure" in Jeremiah Newman (ed.), *The Limerick Rural Survey*, Muintir na Tire Publications (1964).
26. See the article by a 'Special Correspondent' entitled 'A pill but not a cure', in *The Irish Farmers Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 32, 7.8.1954.
27. *Ibid.*
28. See n. 23 above.

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