

The Premier County!

by Seamus J. King



Most of us grew up with the idea that the Premier County tag referred to Tipperary's prowess and success in the game of hurling. Sure the G.A.A was founded at Thurles, four of the seven founders were from the county and we won the first All-Ireland! And we were first in the Roll of Honour for senior hurling titles for decades until the Stripy Men from Kilkenny went ahead of us in the twenty-first century. This was galling to most of us when we recall the long period from 1922 to 1967 when they failed to beat us in a decent match!

But the Premier tag is a recognition of our superiority in many other areas of human activity. It suggests leadership qualities and bravery in the face of opposition. A good example of this was shown by St. Ruadhan from my own place. Diarmuid, the High King of Tara, tried Ruadhan for giving sanctuary to the King's alienated foster son. Nothing fazed, Ruadhan cursed Tara: 'Desolate be Tara forever!' He also forecast a terrible death to the King, which came true. He was stabbed by his foster son. Wounded, he fled to a house, which was set on fire. Seeking to escape the flame, Diarmuid scrambled into a vat of ale and was finished off when a burning ridge pole fell on his head! You don't mess with a Tipperary man!

Reasons for the Tag

Many reasons are given for the county getting the Premier tag. The farmers of the Golden Vale will credit it to having the best land in the country. The Butlers arrived with Henry II, owned most of Tipperary and remained the premier Anglo-Norman family. There are less noble reasons. The Premier county had an unrivalled reputation for lawlessness in the nineteenth century. A return of all crimes and outrages from July 1836 to December 1837 yielded ratios per 1,000 of the population of 1.52 for all Ireland and 2.85 for county Tipperary. In fact there is a view that the proclamation of two counties in Tipperary in 1838 was based on law and order needs. Another argument, attributed to a Christian Brother in Thurles, who used to tell his class that Tipperary was the Premier county for supplying recruits to the British army! There may be substance in this as eighteen men, either from the county or connected with it, were awarded the Victoria Cross.

I have failed to find information on who or when the tag Premier was given to the county. It has been attributed to Thomas Davis, who was editor of the Nation newspaper in the 1840s. As a tribute to the nationalist feeling in Tipperary he said that 'where Tipperary leads, Ireland follows'.

First Appearance of 'Premier'

The first use of the tag has been found in the Nation on October 8, 1864. It appears in a report of an aborted boxing match. The contemporary sport of boxing was

forbidden at the time because it was unregulated and cruel. Boxing matches were organised illegally in remote parts of the country and attracted large crowds not only for the spectacle but for the betting opportunities. Such a match, between two English boxers, Coburn and Mace, was organised to take place between Gouldscross Railway Station and Cashel, but was postponed because of a failure to agree on a referee. In the meantime the Constabulary became aware of it and drafted in large number of police into the area, determined that the match wouldn't take place. Because of the failure to agree to a referee the match was abandoned anyway. However, the newspaper attributed its failure to take place to the vigilance of the police and the determination of the people of Tipperary, the premier county of Ireland, that 'such a debasing and inhuman spectacle of English customs and English sport was prevented.'

I'll leave the final word to the Nationalist. In a report on the visit of John Redmond to Tipperary on April 8, 1910, the newspaper commented on the impressive reception he received: 'It is only fitting that he should make his appeal in the heart of the great fighting county, which is regarded as the pulse of Ireland by reason of the prominent and strenuous part it takes in every struggle for Irish rights.'

The Stonethrowers

Tipperary has a second tag, The Stonethrowers. The origin of this is difficult to find. Tradition has it that it was a cross-country hurling match between Tipperary and Kilkenny that took place in the vicinity of Fennor about the beginning of the nineteenth century, and finished with Tipperary losing the day and, having failed to beat the Cats fair and square, threw stones at them, thereby gaining the unenviable title of 'Tipperary Stone Throwers.' This would put the rivalry between the counties as much older and pre-dating the strong and determined loyalty and pride in parish and county that came with the foundation of the G.A.A.

If the tradition is true, it's a bit of a blot on the character of the men of Tipperary, depicting them as people who are unable to take their beating. Stonethrowing is also associated with anti-police activity and there is another suggestion that the tag originated following an altercation with the British army at some stage. The activity also suggests a kind of helplessness against superior forces and the last throw of the dice for a beaten people. Not a very good image and in stark contrast to the opinion of people outside the county who believe that Tipperary people 'have a superiority complex and feel that they are the best at everything.'