

James Nowlan

The Alderman and the GAA in his Time

James resigned from the Presidency at Annual Convention in 1921 after a reign of 20 years. Convention made him an Honorary Vice-President for life, the only person so honoured.

James Nowlan also played a major citizenship role in his hometown. He offered himself for election to Kilkenny City Council in 1899 and was elected an Alderman (one of the first three members elected in each ward). He was subsequently elected an Alderman at every election until he retired from local politics in 1919 - again a contribution of 20 years service to his own community.

So well recognised was he that he was often simply referred to as the 'Alderman' without the use of his name, even in the national press.

Around the time James retired from the Presidency he fell into indifferent health. He retired from his work and went to live with his brother John in Dublin. His health continued to deteriorate and he died on June 30th 1924.

Jim Walsh.

The family of James Nowlan, wish to express their appreciation for the manner in which James has been acknowledged by the GAA.



Written by Jim Walsh

The book is available from
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James Nowlan played a prominent part in the Gaelic Revivalist Movement at the end of the 19th and into the 20th century. He was very much to the fore in support of the promotion of the traditional Irish sports of hurling, Gaelic football and athletics and was also passionate in encouraging the use of Irish as a spoken language.

This participation leads him to be elected in 1901 to the Presidency of the GAA at a time when the Association was 'on its knees'. Within a few years he, supported by a few fellow enthusiasts, saw the Association recover and reach new levels of popularity and support. This was the foundation on which the present great organisation was built.

James was born in Monsterevin, Co. Kildare, in 1862. His father, Patrick, was a cooper and had been employed as such in Kilkenny but was obliged to move his young family to the Kildare town in 1861 in search of work. James was the 6th child and was baptized in the Parish Church of Monsterevin. The family returned to Kilkenny a few years later and James grew up to be very much a Kilkenny man.

While the principal citizens of Kilkenny were then of the Anglo-Irish political persuasion there was also a core group with strong militaristic republican sentiments. Patrick Nowlan was such a person. He was a confidant and neighbour of James Stephens, a fellow Kilkenny man, who was of course the founder in 1858 of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The movement was strong in Kilkenny and James no doubt frequently attended meetings and rallies with his father and absorbed the Fenian philosophy.

In the aftermath of the Fenian Rising of 1867 the county branches of the police force, the Royal Irish Constabulary, were obliged to observe and report the movements of 'revolutionary suspects'. In time James became a subject of their observations and so 'subversive' was he that it was deemed necessary to take him, and hundreds of others, out of circulation. He was imprisoned and harshly treated in 1916 and again in 1919.

James was apprenticed to the cooperage trade in the footsteps of his father and worked in Sullivan's Brewery in the City. When Sullivan's closed they both worked with Smithwicks and James spent a short period in Guinness's circa 1898.

James was a prominent member of the Commercials Hurling Club in the City in the 1880s. He represented the club on the County Board in the 1890s and when his work required him to move to Dublin for a period he represented Kilkenny on Central Council. He quickly gained recognition at that level and was elected Vice-President of Central Council in 1899. He was elected President at the Annual Convention in 1901.

Meanwhile Central Council had decided to establish Provincial Councils. The Leinster Council was formed in November 1901 and James was elected its first President, a position he held until 1905.

As National President he was recognised as being very much a hands-on President. Apart from filling the usual administrative and representative roles he is recorded as having been happy to assist in manning the turn styles or marshalling for big games or indeed assisting in marking the pitch in preparation for matches.

During his Presidency many challenges confronted the Association and many difficult hurdles, frequently of a political nature had to be faced and negotiated. It is recognised that by the force of his personality and his reasoned approach the President played a key role in steering the Association through the trying 1913 to 1921 period.

Many rule changes relating to administration and the playing of the games were introduced during his Presidency and are still unchanged having stood the test of time over the subsequent almost 100 years.

No doubt the greatest physical monument from that time resulted from the decision to purchase the property, which is now Croke Park. Our members are justifiably very proud of this wonderful stadium but we must never forget the role of the pioneers of the time who made the whole thing possible by their confidence, astuteness and vision.